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“The Spirit of Turbulence”:

East Indian Political Imaginaries in Early 20th Century British Guiana

An Honors Paper for the Department of History

By Faria A. Nasruddin

Bowdoin College, 2020

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, Geeta and Amir. Your vivid stories of childhood in Guyana help me to imagine where I come from, and your love and support make me who I am today.

And to my sister, Aleena, who sat with me bearing witness to these stories, and experiencing life by my side.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Abbreviations	v
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Imagining Beyond the Sugar Estate	8
Colonial depictions of East Indians	12
Colonial re-politicization of East Indian strikers and strikes	19
East Indian laborers' expanded lifeworld	25
Chapter 2: Forming a Cultural Enclave	37
Creole v. East Indian organizations	42
The middle-class cultural community	49
Other organizational support for the middle-class vision	61
Chapter 3: Refashioning the Empire	65
Representing the East Indian agricultural worker	69
The new imperial order	76
The new Guianese order	80
The 'political' and 'social' merge	86
Conclusion	97
Epilogue	101
Bibliography	104

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This project was made feasible due to the generosity of the Bowdoin College Department of History and Bowdoin College Fellowships which enabled me to travel to the British Library, Senate House Library and National Archives in the United Kingdom to conduct archival work.

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The wonderful, albeit seemingly ever-changing, committee—Professors Sakura Christmas, David Gordan, Idriss Jebari, and Patrick Rael—has helped me to shape this historical study. Each discussion we had was immensely enjoyable. Thank you for taking the time to review my work, question my arguments, and provide your unique perspectives and insights.

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## Abbreviations

<b>APNU+AFC</b>	A Partnership For National Unity + Alliance For Change
<b>BGEIA</b>	British Guiana East Indian Association
<b>BGLU</b>	British Guiana Labour Union
<b>EII</b>	East Indian Intelligentsia
<b>GECOM</b>	Guyana Elections Commission
<b>IA</b>	Immigration Agent
<b>IAG</b>	Immigration Agent-General/Indian Agent-General
<b>ID</b>	Immigration Department
<b>MPCA</b>	Manpower Citizens' Association
<b>NPC</b>	Negro Progress Convention
<b>PABG</b>	People's Association of British Guiana
<b>Pln.</b>	Plantation
<b>PNC</b>	People's National Congress
<b>PPP</b>	People's Progressive Party (/Civic)
<b>RPI</b>	Rational Practical Idealism
<b>SDMS</b>	Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha
<b>SPA</b>	Sugar Producers' Association
<b>SSDPS</b>	Shri Sanatan Dharma Pratinidhi Sabha
<b>TUC</b>	British Trade Union Congress

*Did not these Coolies plant sugar-cane, fields and fields of swaying sugar-cane to give the taste of sweetness to us all and to all sorts of people all over the world? And let us not forget how often this sweetness became bitter gall to them seeking their rights...remember...remember...*

**– “I am a Coolie,” (1973)**  
**Rajkumari Singh, Indo-Guyanese poet**

## Introduction

At the apex of South America and belly of the Caribbean shores lies a small multi-ethnic state: Guyana. A colonial construction, the “land of six peoples,” is home to a diverse population of Amerindians and diaspora communities, including Africans, East Indians, Chinese, Portuguese, and other Europeans.<sup>1</sup> Although these populations share migration as a common experience, they settled in the colony after serial colonial immigration: from sixteenth century Amerindian migration across the colony under Dutch colonialism, to forced displacement of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic, to emigration of indentured immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from British India and China. Different experiences of migration divided communities in the country into ethnicity-based enclaves: East Indian indentured laborers were the last population to be introduced into the former colony and are still the present majority at 40 percent.<sup>2</sup> Originally imagined as only temporary laborers, East Indians have held onto their identities as diasporic subjects. Imagining themselves as East Indian first, Indo-Guyanese peoples have shaped the political landscape of the colony in their quest to figure out their place in a fragmented creole society.

The Colonial Government of British Guiana, which took control in 1796, aimed to maintain a consistent supply of labor to its plantation economy. After the abolition of slavery in 1834 and the subsequent apprenticeship period, which ended in 1838, most Afro-Guyanese laborers migrated into urban centers to seek other forms of work. As a result of the agricultural labor scarcity, the planter-class wanted to secure new sources of labor. And so, they convinced the Colonial Government to introduce a labor scheme sponsored by the metropole to support the sugar plantations. Modeled

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<sup>1</sup> East Indian is used throughout this essay to refer to the immigrants from British India avoid confusion with the ‘Indian’ or indigenous population of South America.

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Public Health, Bureau of Statistics (Guyana). *2012 Population & Housing Census: final report*. Georgetown: MPH; 2012.



after a longstanding practice from medieval Europe, which had been common throughout the Atlantic world until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the indenture scheme brought laborers from British India to the West Indies.<sup>3</sup> From 1838 to 1920, nearly 238,960 East Indians migrated to British Guiana under five year contracts (known colloquially among the laborers as “*girmit*”) that stipulated the kind of work, hours of work and rates of remuneration in the destination colony.<sup>4</sup> While these contracts were available in English and other regional languages, historians debate the extent that East Indian migrants understood them, the recruiters explained them and the decision was free.

Because 64 sugar estates dominated the economic landscape of British Guiana, the planter class considered East Indians the “salvation” of the colony after the regime of slavery and apprenticeship ended.<sup>5</sup> The indentured laborers came from the lower and middle classes of India, and the largest group was single young males the ages of 20 to 30 years.<sup>6</sup> However, East Indians were not received well in the Colony by the Afro-Guianese, since East Indians’ low wages under the indenture system were viewed as the cause of depressing wages for the laborers in the free economy. Additionally, colonial authorities pitted the two groups against each other: they touted East Indians as the better, more reliable laborers compared to the Afro-Guianese, which amplified the sense that East Indians were supplanting the Afro-Guianese.

After the initial five-year contract, indentured laborers had the choice to either re-patriate back to British India or to re-indenture for another five years, after which they would qualify for industrial residence or free re-patriation.<sup>7</sup> Planters preferred that East Indian settle and incentivized it

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<sup>3</sup> Lomarsh Roopnarine *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation, 1838-1920* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>4</sup> “*Girmit*” is derived from a north Indian pronunciation of “agreement;” Lomarsh Roopnarine, “The Repatriation, Readjustment, and Second Term Migration of ex-indentured Indian Labourers from British Guiana and Trinidad to India, 1838-1955,” *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 83, no. 1/2 (2009): 71; Parbattie Ramsarran, “The Indentured contract and its Impact on Labor Relationship and Community Reconstruction in British Guiana,” *International Journal of Criminology and Sociological Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (December 2008): 178.

<sup>5</sup> C.Y. Shepard, “The Sugar Industries of the British West Indies and British Guiana with special reference to Trinidad,” *Economic Geography* 5, no. 2. (1929): 152.

<sup>6</sup> Roopnarine, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture, Resistance and Accommodation, 1838-1920*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Industrial residence refers to residence on the plantations; Roopnarine, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture, Resistance and Accommodation*, 7.

by allotting rice plots and cattle to them. Around 60 percent of East Indians settled in the West Indies rather than repatriated.<sup>8</sup> By the turn of the century, East Indians were the single largest ethnic group: from 1891 to 1921, the number of East Indians increased from 105,463 to 124,938, which was approximately 43 percent of the population.<sup>9</sup>

In 1917, the indenture scheme ceased under pressure from Indian nationalists in British India, and by 1920 all East Indians were fully freed from their contracts. In comparison to other populations, East Indians in British Guiana were introduced as ‘citizens’ fairly late, and their image as ‘coolies,’ or transitional laborers persisted well after the indenture system ended.<sup>10</sup> Migration and subsequent isolation from the wider creole society in British Guiana caused East Indians to create new forms of organization and identities for themselves. However, East Indians in British Guiana were not a monolithic group. Aside from the ethnic and religious diversity encompassed in the term “East Indian,” East Indian residents of British Guiana comprised various socioeconomic positions. The resident laborers on the sugar estates were the largest group, however there were also East Indian laborers living in the surrounding villages after acquiring grants to purchase small plots of land, and middle-class East Indian urbanized professionals. Each socioeconomic group had a different lived experience in the colony and different outlook on what it meant to be a creole East Indian.

This thesis addresses the question of diasporic East Indian political consciousness, vision, and organization from the years leading up to the end of the indenture system to the formation of the first mass-based and multi-racial political party in 1950. Studies on the history of Guyana tend to

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<sup>8</sup> Lomarsh Roopnarine, “Indo-Caribbean Migration: From Periphery to Core,” *Caribbean Quarterly*, 49(3) (2003): 31.

<sup>9</sup> “Appendix I: Census of population for the periods 1891, 1911, and 1921,” in *Report on the Scheme for Indian Emigration to British Guiana Part I—Report by Dewan Bahadur P. Kesava Pillai and V.N. Tivary* (Pillai-Tivary Report), (Simla: Government Press, 1924); Irene B. Taeuber, “British Guiana: Some Demographic Aspects of Economic Development.” *Population Index* 18, no. 1 (1952): 4; percentage based on 1911 demographic statistics).

<sup>10</sup> “The term ‘coolie’ is of disputed origins: some believe it derives from an aboriginal tribe in the Gujarat region of India, and others believe it comes from the Tamil word ‘kuli’, meaning ‘payment for occasional menial work’” (The National Archives), however the colonists adopted the term ‘coolie’ in a derogatory sense to refer to all East Indians and Chinese laborers.

focus on how ethnic conflict erupted during the independence period (through the 1950s and 1960s). The existing literature on the origins of ethnic divides in the British West Indies focuses on theories of cultural pluralism, borrowed from sociology in the 1980 and 1990s, that stipulates that “plural societies are only units in a political sense,” and that conflict is derived from the fact that no population “dominates the political structure.”<sup>11</sup> These studies, which focus primarily on political institutions as the location of contest, presume that ethnic, and by extension cultural, identities are fixed.<sup>12</sup>

More recent studies of ethnic and cultural identities in the British Caribbean center on the production of diasporic and ethnic identities. Stuart Hall’s conception of cultural identity as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” is central to this thesis. Hall posits that cultural identities are “not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture,” but rather “come from somewhere, have histories.”<sup>13</sup> Hall deepens his definition of cultural identity by claiming that cultural identities are “the points of identification...which are made within discourses and culture.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, cultural identity is a *positioning*, or an understanding of one-self relative to others. Aisha Khan, in her reflections on diaspora studies, pushes for the field to treat “diasporic peoples as being a part of cultures rather than as possessors of culture.”<sup>15</sup> In doing so, there is a greater potential to study the unique ways that diasporic populations interact with culture, rather than looking at the ways in which they modify culture. It is in this vein that I explore how Indo-Guyanese identities were cultivated as political worldviews in the late years of the colonial period. While

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<sup>11</sup> J.S. Furnivall as quoted in Ferkiss, Victor C. and Barbara Ferkiss, "Race and Politics in Trinidad and Guyana," *World Affairs* 143, no. 1 (1971): 7.

<sup>12</sup> See David Hinds, *Ethnopolitics and Power Sharing in Guyana: History and Discourse* (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2010); Perry Mars, "Ethnic Conflict and Political Control: The Guyana Case," *Social and Economic Studies* 39, no. 3 (1990): 65-94; Ralph R. Premdas, *Ethnic Conflict and Development: The Case of Guyana* (Aldershot, England: Avebury, 1995); L.A. Despres, *Cultural Pluralism and Nationalist Politics in British Guiana* (New York: Rand McNally, 1967).

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.

<sup>14</sup> Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 226.

<sup>15</sup> Aisha Khan, "Material and Immaterial Bodies: Diaspora Studies and the Problem of Culture, Identity, and Race," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 19, no. 3 (48) (2015): 47.

this project runs the risk of what Khan critiques as “inadvertently replicating racializing formulae, anticipating endpoints, and anesthetizing the protean and context-contingent boundaries that distinguish among diasporic peoples,” its aim is to counter the prevailing conceptions of East Indians as bearers of their traditional culture and to understand how culture was mobilized in their struggle for local political space.<sup>16</sup>

There has been significant research on the development of Black identities in the Caribbean, but East Indians’ cultural identities remain relatively understudied, especially in British Guiana.<sup>17</sup> Existing historiography divides East Indians’ history in British Guiana into three distinct periods—the indenture period, post-indenture period, and post-Jagan period—because of their contextual differences. The first is characterized by studies of resistance within the indentured labor system and tends to isolate East Indians from the wider creole society, while the last is dominated by the figure of Cheddi Jagan, a British Guianese politician educated in the United States, who is credited with bringing anticolonial consciousness to East Indians. The middle period, however, is murky. On one hand, this period is considered an extension of the indenture period, since not many practices changed immediately. On the other, it saw the rise and fall of multiple political and economic associations that attempted to organize East Indians. This project aims to deepen the narrative of East Indians in British Guiana by focusing especially on the period from 1917 to 1940 when there were multiple possibilities for East Indian citizenship in the colony after indenture ended. This thesis explores the early creole-born generations of East Indians and how they constructed their cultural and political identities within the colony in contrast to ideas of creolization, a process of cultural mixing or entanglement specific to the colonial Caribbean context.<sup>18</sup> As Hall notes, creolization entailed an

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<sup>16</sup> Aisha Khan, “Material and Immaterial Bodies,” 48.

<sup>17</sup> During the 1970s, under the leadership of Forbes Burnham, the government of Guyana focused on promoting a single form of Afro-creole nationalism under the slogan “One people, one nation, one destiny;” for more information see: Mahabir, K. “Whose Nation Is This? The Struggle over National and Ethnic Identity in Trinidad and Guyana,” *Caribbean Studies*, 29(2) (2016): 283-302.

<sup>18</sup> For a greater discussion of “creolization” see Stuart Hall, “Creolité and the Process of Creolization,” in *Creolizing Europe: Legacies and Transformations*, Ed. Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Encarnación, and Shirley Anne Tate (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

hierarchical imbalance; in the context of British Guiana, creole culture was associated with a 'native' Black Guianese culture. Various East Indian forms of consciousness activated culture as a sphere by which they carved out their own communities of belonging, definitions of citizenship, and sense of self.

The first chapter explores how East Indians' strike action from 1900 to 1917, hinted at a budding political vision. I argue that East Indian-led strikes challenged the treatment of East Indians on the plantations and resisted the colonial imaginary of East Indian belonging and value in the colony. Since there was no formal organization to articulate East Indian laborers' grievances, I explore this political vision through colonial reportage: Immigration Agent-General Reports, and Colonial Office and Colonial Government of India Commissions. I also examine the British Guianese Colonial Government's framing of East Indians as exclusively contractual laborers. East Indians under an indenture-based labor system challenged this valuation by creating a new political imaginary for themselves vis-à-vis their relationship to their labor and life in the colony. This new vision re-imagined how East Indians could spend their time, model their houses, and build their families.

During the indentured period, some East Indians moved off the estates and acquired land. These East Indian landowners eventually formed a classic colonial middle-class of urbanized professionals. The second chapter of this thesis thus explores the political imaginary promoted by the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA), the largest organized collective of middle-class East Indians. They attempted to create a homogenous cultural community, proposed a new model of citizenship in the colony that resisted creolization, and emphasized East Indians' innate cultural differences from the rest of the colonized peoples. In doing so, the BGEIA established greater autonomous control over East Indians. This chapter argues that this version of citizenship was an extension of the grievances of the laborers themselves because it implied that East Indians had an identity outside that of immigrant laborers. However, this vision was a double-edge sword: while it expanded

East Indians' place in colonial society beyond the labor system, it also re-entrenched the colonial racial hierarchy.

In the mid-thirties, another series of spontaneous labor “disturbances” erupted across British Guiana and the wider British West Indies. In British Guiana, they were the result of the global depression, which caused wages to decline and unemployment and underemployment to rise. The BGEIA who had a small role in these events, fell out of popularity due to their ideological and material distance from the estate laborers. In its wake, the Man-Power Citizens' Association (MPCA) emerged as the predominant political association (in the form of a trade union) for East Indians. The MPCA, founded by two former leaders of the BGEIA, practiced labor unionism inspired by Ayube M. Edun's ideology: Rational Practical Idealism, which stated that East Indians were the agricultural backbone of the Guianese economy, and as a working class, should have greater citizenship rights. In this vision, East Indians were integral to a wider imperial polity, and within the Guianese polity, as the majority demographic, they no longer needed a minority status or cultural protection. East Indian culture and East Indian citizens were re-positioned as the center of a new political order.

The main questions this thesis aims to tackle are related to how East Indians developed an identity in the colony that privileged their ethnicity, and how they mobilized that identity. How did East Indians view their position in the colony and which communities did they feel they belonged to? Why did East Indians maintain a connection, imagined and material, to their culture? And, how did their disposition toward culture influence their conception of what it meant to be a colonial citizen? This thesis argues that East Indians' political imaginaries were dominated by middle-class articulations. The expansive creole visions the estate laborers presented was narrowed into a vision of cultural difference and participation in the imperial state. Culture as an interpretative worldview was deeply enmeshed into self-value and definitions of place with the imperial system and became the primary lens to negotiate the local meaning of citizenship and place.

## Chapter 1: Imagining a Lifeworld Beyond the Sugar Estate

### Introduction

In 1916, the Inspector General of the Police and Honorary Colonel of the British Guiana Militia opened fire on a group of striking East Indians on Pln. Rose Hall, killing 15 and wounding 41.<sup>19</sup> The riot at Pln. Rose Hall is marked in the collective memory and historiography of East Indian resistance as the most salient point in the development of political consciousness. The riot represents an escalation of violence between the indentured laborers and the colonial authorities; it was one instance of active confrontation on the plantations among many that began in late nineteenth century and escalated in the twentieth century. However, the only narrative that remains of the events at Pln. Rose Hall is in the colonial reportage, as recorded by the report commissioned by the Colonial Government of British Guiana, that minimizes the grievances of the striking East Indians, instead of locating it within a broader pattern.

Indenture is commonly written about as a “new system of slavery.”<sup>20</sup> Remnants of the slave plantation were present on the estates: East Indians lived in the ex-barracks, renamed the ‘coolie lines’; plantation owners divided their work into either field and factory work (where sugar cane juice was produced); and working hours could range from 11 to 18 hours daily.<sup>21</sup> However, indentured and freed East Indians’ relationship to work differed because the majority of East Indians laborers received wages on a piece-wage or task basis. Additionally, the Immigration Department (ID) mediated between the planter class and the indentured laborers and oversaw the wellbeing of the indentured laborers. While the direct protection of the ID was not afforded to free East Indians, they indirectly benefitted the Department’s arbitration. In all, the indenture system concerned itself with

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<sup>19</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1912-13*. British Guiana Immigration Department. (Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana: The Argosy Company, Ltd., 1913).

<sup>20</sup> See: Ashutosh Kumor, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920* (India: Cambridge University Press, 2017) for a more detailed overview of the historiography of indenture.

<sup>21</sup> Mandar Anant Thakur, "Change in Policy Towards Indian Emigrants to British Guiana," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 65, (2004): 1045.

the welfare of East Indians through a framework of laws motivated by the desire to explicitly distinguish the system from slavery and make it self-sustaining.<sup>22</sup>

Scholarship on East Indian resistance on the estates has focused on how East Indians were not resisting the system of indenture, but actually only protesting specific conditions of indentureship. Lomarsh Roopnarine and Basdeo Mangru, for instance, focus on applying the framework from James C. Scott's *Weapons of the Weak*; they extract the chronology of events and methodology of resistance East Indians separate from colonial biases.<sup>23</sup> While their works illuminate East Indians' action on-the-grounds, their focus on the minutia of the everyday acts obscures how resistance fits into the larger timeline of ethnic identity formation. The authors' focus on how East Indians sought accommodations within "constrained choices," to borrow a term from Ann Stoler, rather than resisting a subject-position imposed onto them, limits their definition of resistance.<sup>24</sup>

That being said, more recent studies of East Indian resistance reference how the colonial archives and commissions are products of a logic that sought to deny the existence of rationality amongst the East Indians. For instance, Radica Mahase and Kusha Haraksingh explore East Indian resistance in Trinidad; both authors recognize how East Indians had limited resources and were excluded from public life. Mahase and Haraksingh expand the definition of political activity by look at other avenues of potential East Indian resistance, like the cultural sphere. However, both authors similarly use the colonial categories to reconstruct the plantation system. As a result, Mahase concludes that East Indian resistance is "localized" and emotionally instigated, and Haraksingh only refers to how the form of documentation influenced the outcome of reports when he states that the

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<sup>22</sup> Rachel Sturman, "Indian Indentured Labor and the History of the International Rights Regime," *American Historical Review* Volume 119, Issue 5, (2014): 1440.

<sup>23</sup> Roopnarine, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation, 1838-1920*; Basdeo Mangru, *A History of East Indian Resistance on the Guyana Sugar Estates, 1869-1948* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Art of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, (2002): 99.



British colonial authorities tried to maintain an image of tranquility in the colonies.<sup>25</sup> These studies similarly focus on resistance as a directed toward the conditions of the indenture system, and also examine indenture as an isolated system from wider colonial society.

The available sources on East Indian resistance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are limited: the only sources accessible are those that were written by and for colonial authorities on “riots” for the maintenance of the indenture system.<sup>26</sup> Gyanendra Pandey’s study of study of colonial reconstructions of Hindu-Muslim “riots” in British India illuminates how the East Indian-led riots on sugar estates can be read. Pandey argues that colonial reconstructions of riots in the Indian context “[empty] out all history from the political experience of the people.”<sup>27</sup> In his study, the colonial narrative of the communal riot was a statement on India’s past; it demarcated the historical boundary between pre- and post-Britain by stating that Hindu-Muslim “native” violence was natural to Indian character.<sup>28</sup> By deconstructing the colonial language of the riot and the reportage on the estate riots, British Guianese East Indian estate laborers’ intentions can be better foregrounded.

Additionally, colonial logic was not static, but actively maintained and updated to serve the interest of the colonial authorities and planter class.<sup>29</sup> This chapter will look at two types of colonial sources: the Immigration Agent-General (IAG) Annual Reports, and Colonial Government of India sponsored commission reports (Chimman Lal and Pillai-Tivary). As the available sources are all products of the colonial logic, they deliberately obscure East Indian agency in their content and form. Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper outline how “social taxonomies” allowed for specific forms of colonial control at specific times, meaning that the label given to a person could determine their

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<sup>25</sup> Radica Mahase, “Plenty a dem run away!—resistance by Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad, 1870-1920,” (*Labor History* 49 no. 4, 2008): 474; Kusha Haraksingh, “Control and Resistance Among Overseas Indian Workers: A Study of Labour on the Sugar Plantations of Trinidad, 1875-1917,” *The Journal of Caribbean History* (1981): 14.

<sup>26</sup> This chapter will refer to the strikes as such, however when quoting colonial documentation or paraphrasing the Colonial Government, “riot” in quotations will be used to emphasize the connotations of the term when employed.

<sup>27</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press), 24.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Stoler, “Colonial Archives,” 100.

social possibilities as well as “the permeability of boundaries.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the racially motivated logic of colonial reports must be explored in order to reveal how the colonial authorities constructed the epistemic space that East Indians operated within. In the colonial reportage, there was not a binary split between homogenization and the creation of difference vis-à-vis East Indian laborers: East Indians were integral parts of the plantation system, but culturally distinct from the planter-class and Black laborers. The contradicting aspects of the colonial political imagination opened up space for East Indians to contest their status and create their own political imagination. East Indians were not working solely within the mental boundaries of the plantation system but were capable of—and did—imagine a mode of being distinct from the colonial imaginary. I identify their imagined role as a political vision and act of agency, since it countered East Indians’ status as defined in colonial legislation. In doing so, I take a broader definition of “political” that encompasses multiple dimensions (social, economic and cultural).

I argue that the strikes, labelled as riots or disturbances, on the sugar estates were conflicts over the just treatment of East Indians in the colony. Since East Indians’ grievances went beyond the plantation system, they can be read as a form of resistance to the colonial imagination of East Indian belonging. The descriptions of East Indians in the Colonial Government’s documentation of the sugar estate strikes re-framed East Indians’ acts of resistance to contract violations in order to maintain their identities as labor. Furthermore, through reading the stated causes of “riots,” I find that both indentured and freed East Indians created a new political imaginary for themselves regarding their relationship to their labor and life in the colony.

The first section of this chapter will focus on the relationship between the Colonial Government and East Indians. It will address the question of how the Colonial Government imagined East

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<sup>30</sup> Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony,” In *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (University of California Press, 1997), 6.

Indian acculturation into the colonial system through an exploration of the production of “common sense in a changing imperial order in which social reform, questions of rights and representation, and liberal impulses and explicit racisms played an increasing role.”<sup>31</sup> It will explore how the IAG Annual Reports supported two different racial assumptions about East Indians, which aimed to include East Indians in a settlement project in the colonies and constructed their difference vis-à-vis both white colonists and Afro-Guianese. Then, this chapter will move to an “against the grain” reading of the colonial logic; these reports follow a “law and order” form that obscures East Indian voices by reducing them to individual objects studied, and discuss how and why the Colonial Government re-framed East Indians in their reports of strikes. It will consider how the language used in the reportage racialized East Indians and personalized the causes of strikes in order to downplay their intensity and absolve colonial authorities of responsibility. Finally, through assessment of their grievances this chapter will demonstrate how East Indians actively created a new imaginary for themselves in colonial society. The points put forth by the East Indian strikers directly contested the main lynchpins of the contractual labor relationship constructed by the Colonial Government, developed a clear program of East Indian domesticity, and suggested an expression of political autonomy that was written out of the colonial narrative.

### **Colonial depictions of East Indians**

The planter class’ interests were always at the center of the decision to use immigrant labor. After emancipation, the maintenance of the sugar plantations was seen as necessary for the “the progress of civilization,” as Sir H. Barkly pointed out to Earl Grey in a dispatch dated 21 March 1849. For the colonial authorities to maintain a productive economy, they saw it necessary to build a labor

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<sup>31</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2010), 3.

force dependent on contracts that would always favor the planting class. Since many of the new emancipated slaves migrated off the plantations and began to seek work on their own terms, the decision to use immigrant labor was also aimed at undercutting them. Barkly stated that “the Africans could dictate their own terms to the sugar planters and insist on higher wages, as they did in the days immediately succeeding emancipation,” which was deemed unsuitable since apparently “the industry could not afford to pay the high wages demanded.”<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, the colonial authorities justified using East Indian labor on the sugar estates because they believed that the workers would contribute to the growth of the colonial economy through securing the planter class a monopoly in British Guianese sugar trade in order to “smooth the inevitable difficulties.”<sup>33</sup> The Lord Sanderson Commission cited East Indian immigration as “the greatest assistance in developing the resources of some of our tropical colonies, and in increasing their prosperity.”<sup>34</sup> They saw East Indians as “a valuable addition to the population,” since contract East Indians limited East Indians’ bargaining power.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, colonial authorities and the planter class also valued East Indians for their contribution to the colonial economy through the cultivation of rice plots. The fact that East Indians “created a new industry” increased their economic value to the colonial authorities and rendered them a sustainable source of economic potential.<sup>36</sup> Colonial authorities thought of East Indians as the sole group with this economic potential due to their behavioral patterns and traditions, which they juxtaposed to those of Black laborers.

In justifying how East Indians would contribute to the colony, colonial authorities racialized East Indians’ traits. East Indians were “thrifty” and had “preserving habits” that lent themselves

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<sup>32</sup> *Report of the Committee on Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates* (Lord Sanderson Commission), Cm. 5192, (London: HMSO, 1910), 60.

<sup>33</sup> “Sir H. Barkly to Earl Grey, dispatch of the 21<sup>st</sup> March 1849,” Appendix: British Guiana, Lord Sanderson Commission, 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

favorably to labor on the plantations.<sup>37</sup> Racial theories of labor underpinned the immigration and labor system. For instance, when Sir H. Barkly wrote to Earl Grey in the late nineteenth century he described East Indians as “perfectly docile and easily managed,” which were characteristics that would have allowed the planter class greater leeway to create a contractual system with wages and conditions to maximize output.<sup>38</sup> He also wrote about East Indians as part of the wider colony, stating that they were “orderly and law abiding members of the community,” who would not require “special legislation or administrative provisions for their governance.”<sup>39</sup> The assumption that East Indians would assimilate into the rest of colonial society was based on the prediction that East Indians would not “[trouble] themselves to take part in political movements or agitations.”<sup>40</sup> In this sense, East Indians were assumed to be more suited to plantation labor since they would not challenge the contractual system.

In portraying East Indians as “docile,” colonial authorities directly contrasted them to the Black Guianese population in order to justify their exclusion of the pre-existing population in the colony from the sugar industry. An example of the binary between the Black and East Indian laborers was how the Black workers were considered to be indigenous (since Amerindians were excluded from the colonial economy), and thus all East Indians were all labelled “immigrants.”<sup>41</sup> Colonial authorities created an exaggerated impression of racial tension by using the narrative that East Indian immigrants were more productive and desirable laborers to paint Black laborers as “jealous” instead of expressing rational agency over choice of work and demands for higher wages. Thus, when Black Creole workers struck, colonial authorities did not see them as expressing agency in their choice to work and to choose their work, but as irrational in their decision to refuse work.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 174.

For instance, on February 27<sup>th</sup> 1906 the Immigration Agent (IA) of District No. 2 and 3 wrote to the Agent-General that in his annual report that “[Black Creoles] will only work when it suits them to do so and when the description of work offered meets their approval.”<sup>42</sup> The IA from District No. 5 added that “the Creole, as a rule, does not care to work in the field, except during the grinding season when he can get cane-cutting whereby he earns very high wages.”<sup>43</sup> Through continual portrayal of Black laborers as “lazy” and “disinclined to the till the soil,” colonial authorities justified using East Indians as the primary source of agricultural labor. Furthermore, in correspondence from the Acting Governor to the Secretary of State in June 1909, the Acting Governor highlighted how Black-East Indian tension should be non-existent since the African laborer “[had] been educated up and probably beyond the English farmhand. He cannot attain his standard of comfort on a shilling a day, the statutory minimum wage of the indentured East Indian, and the conditions of life do not compel him to work for it. Therefore, he naturally does not work for it, but seeks and obtains other better-paid if more laborious employment.”<sup>44</sup>

Here, the Acting Governor depicted hierarchical relationship between the Black and East Indians populations by declaring plantation work to be below the skillset and wage requirements of Black laborers. It is notable that the Acting Governor described the traits that make Black laborers ill-suited to plantation labor as acquired through education and not part of their ‘native’ culture. This implied that Black laborers went through an assimilative or civilizing process that East Indians had not. While on one hand, colonial authorities viewed Black laborers as more civilized (or closer to the English laborer); on the other, the process of civilization made them unsuited for plantation labor. Black laborers’ demands were seen as a product of an undesirable characteristic—a by-product of

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<sup>42</sup> “Immigration Agent, No.2 and 3 Districts to the Immigration Agent-General (February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1906),” in *Further Correspondence relating to Disturbances in British Guiana* (1905 Further Correspondence), Cm. 3026, London: HMSO, 1906.

<sup>43</sup> “Immigration Agent, No.5 District to the Immigration Agent-General (March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1906),” 1905 Further Correspondence.

<sup>44</sup> “British Guiana: The Acting Governor to the Secretary of State, 26 May 1909), Appendix No. 5 (b), Lord Sanderson Commission, 6.

their education. Colonial authorities hoped that East Indians would have had “an educative effect” and introduce “new habits of industry and improved methods of agriculture.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, the local colonial government did not view Black laborers as a source of economic potential, and looked down on their social order because they viewed it as unproductive to the planter class’ interests.

After emancipation, the newly freed slaves created forms of organizations to advance their interests. Walter Rodney explains that these “jobbing gangs”, mobile organizations that petitioned for better wages, were encouraged by planters toward the end of slavery.<sup>46</sup> Based on the history of jobbing gangs, there was a clear precedent for formal labor organization among Black Guianese. Therefore, the presence of the People’s Association of British Guiana (PABG), a working-class organization that emerged in the late 1800s, is not surprising. The Colonial Government used a PABG memorandum to support the claim that inter-racial rivalry existed in the labor economy. In a memorandum submitted to the Colonial Government, the organization asserted that the main issue at the time of writing was the fact that “adequate measures cannot be adopted to prevent the race from being eventually extinguished.”<sup>47</sup> The memorandum further claimed that colonial administrators were at fault since they denied the right to the Black population to settle as agriculturalists and replaced them with East Indian immigrants.<sup>48</sup> They claimed that they wanted immigrants to “come into the colony as potential citizens and if they came in at all they shall come in free,” as opposed to under the indenture system.<sup>49</sup> If the Colonial Government undertook this provision, then East Indians would not have been contract bound and would not have received the same benefits they did under the guardianship of the ID, virtually levelling the job market. Specifically, East Indians’ wage rates would not have been fixed by the 5-year contract, set in India, or upon arrival in the colony. The

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<sup>45</sup> Lord Sanderson Commission, 21-22.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Rodney, "Plantation Society in Guyana," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 4, no. 4 (1981): 648.

<sup>47</sup> “British Guiana, Memorandum from the People’s Association,” Appendix No. 5 (f), Lord Sanderson Commission, 16.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

memorandum's presence in the 1905 Correspondence files suggests that the PAGB was aware of the race-based labor policies used to undermine Afro-Guianese socioeconomic possibilities, and that the colonial authorities relied on organizations like the PAGB to support the narrative that racial tensions existed between the two laboring groups. According to this colonial narrative, East Indians had no political motivations and qualms, whereas the Black Guianese were difficult and demanding.

Another example of the construction of racialized difference is in the colonial narrative of the 1905 strike. The strike started on 28 November when workers at the Sandbach Parker wharf in Georgetown struck; they demanded 16 cents an hour instead of the 48 cents a day.<sup>50</sup> The peaceful picketing turned violent over the course of the following days as more people, including women and children, joined.<sup>51</sup> The police confronted the crowd after the Governor gave a speech; however the strikers moved to other towns and estates.<sup>52</sup> Governor Sir F.M. Hodgson wrote to Mr. Lyttelton, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, about the 1905 strikes in Georgetown, labelling them as “disturbances,” which essentially criminalized acts of politico-economic agency.<sup>53</sup> He also implied that Black laborers in British Guiana were disrupting the status quo negatively by making demands in their self-interest. When the “disturbances” spilled over to the estates, Black cane-cutters joined, however East Indians were absent at least from the colonial reconstruction.<sup>54</sup> The Governor stated that “the African population [drove] the East Indians from the scene of their work,” depicting the East Indian laborers as devoid of any political agency; East Indian laborers were objects of Black Guianese intimidation. It was to the advantage of the colonial authorities to claim that “there is absolutely no complaint from East Indians,” which reinforced the racialized stereotype that East

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<sup>50</sup> Odeen Ishmael, *The Guyana Story: From Earliest Times to Independence* (XLIBRIS, February 2013).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> “Governor Sir F.M. Hodgson to Mr. Lyttelton (December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1906),” in *Correspondence relating to Disturbances in British Guiana* (1905 Correspondence), Cm. 2822, London: HMSO, 1906.

<sup>54</sup> Black laborers were employed as cane-cutters on a seasonal basis because they were viewed as stronger and better suited to the physical intensity of the job.



Indians had no political inclinations.<sup>55</sup> Later, the Governor would write to Lyttelton that “the estate coolies are doing the work which would have been done by the blacks; we are paying the same price in the same field last year,” implying that East Indians were only concerned with their own economic survival.<sup>56</sup>

In constructing East Indians as docile laborers in contrast to demanding and autonomous Black laborers, the colonial authorities justified imposing a paternalistic relationship toward East Indians. The process of indentureship and subsequent settlement in the colony imagined East Indian immigrants as dependents that needed to be looked after. In a 26 May 1909 letter, the Acting Governor wrote to the Secretary of State that “indenture means care in sickness, free medical attention, free hospital accommodation, morning rations in the early days, sanitary dwellings, habits of industry gained, a guaranteed minimum daily wage, and general supervision by Government officials.”<sup>57</sup> Through the construction of bureaucratic measures to assure the welfare of East Indians, both governments agreed to treat East Indians as in need of safeguarding. In this model East Indians were not permitted political agency. The Governor wrote that after the indenture period has ended, he envisioned “the merging in the population of seasoned industrious agriculturalists adding to the wealth-producing power of the Colony.”<sup>58</sup> In the colony, even after the end of their indenture period, East Indians’ participation and belonging was limited to their “habits of industry” or economic productivity. Therefore, when East Indians did not act in accordance with their prewritten colonial role, the colonial authorities’ racial constructions and colonial logic shifted in order to continuously justify their economic aims.

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<sup>55</sup> “Governor to the Secretary of State (April 16, 1906),” 1905 Further Correspondence, 3-4.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> “British Guiana: The Acting Governor to the Secretary of State, 26 May 1909,” Appendix No. 5 (b), Lord Sanderson Commission, 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

### Colonial re-framing of East Indian strikers and strikes

The documentation of East Indian strikes constructed an image of East Indians as both docile laborers and violent ‘natives’ who needed to be controlled; this contradiction opened space for East Indians to contest their status and create their own imaginary of life in the colony. Strikes on the sugar estates started as early as 1872, however there was little mention of trends or comparison between them by colonial authorities.<sup>59</sup> Each strike was reported as an isolated instance, limited to a particular estate, and claimed to be resolved by colonial intervention. The IAG Annual Reports presented the majority of cases as disputes over wages, and the majority of those were claimed to have been settled by the respective district’s IA. In cases where the IAG recommended for a raise in wages, the IAG’s stated reason was commonly either a “misunderstanding” or “a mistake,” terms that absolved the estates and, by extension, the Colonial Government from the responsibility to treat workers fairly and denied the fact that the workers sparked change. For instance, in 1901-02, four out of twenty-five strikes were about wages, and “nearly all were the outcome of a misunderstanding between estate’s authorities and the immigrants as to the rates of wages agreed upon.”<sup>60</sup> Colonial reportage has a specific form and focus when reporting on riots: (1) circumstances, (2) manner of outbreak, and (3) process of suppression.<sup>61</sup> In the case of the East Indian strikes, as reported by the IAG, the focus on circumstances and manner of outbreak attributed “riots” to the East Indians’ reactive and ‘native’ character, whereas the process of suppression focused on the British colonial authorities as a “wise and neutral power,” by portraying any changes as the uninfluenced and objective decision by the colonial forces.<sup>62</sup> The IAG wrote about these strikes in a “law and order” form, and portrayed strikers as irrational and disruptive, and the colonial forces as the heroes repairing societal

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<sup>59</sup> Ron Ramdin, *Arising from Bondage: A History of the Indo-Caribbean People* (New York: New York University Press), 62.

<sup>60</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1901-02*. British Guiana. Immigration Department. (Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana: C.K. Jardine, 1902), 11.

<sup>61</sup> Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, 48

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 49; 64.

structures. By writing from an angle that highlighted the power of the colonial administrators to suppress the strikers, the available documentation downplays the extent to which strikers exhibited agency in their resistance.

In the “law and order” narrative of colonial suppression, the term “riot” furthered the presumption that East Indians were inherently ‘native’ or uncivilized, because the colonial authorities saw riots as a result of “fanatism.”<sup>63</sup> Because of the portrayal of the Colonial Government as a peace-keeper, the colonial search for the origins of each “riot” concluded at the most immediate spark and ignored structural and systemic issues. They commonly pinpointed ‘native’ individuals as the cause of mass chaos, since they saw riots “through emphasis on ethnic and doctrinal signs for the identification of crowds.”<sup>64</sup> For example, on Pln. Lusignan a shovel-gang struck work, cut the telephone wires, and refused to disperse outside the Manager’s house. Colonial authorities used fire-arms against them and justified it, since “[the manager and overseer] were besieged by the immigrants who cut the telephone wires ...believing their lives to be in danger.”<sup>65</sup> Twenty-four immigrants were charged with rioting and sixteen “ringleaders” were moved to other estates. The majority of cases like this resulted in the transferal or arrest of those considered to have a violent ‘native’ character.

East Indians, from that point forward, were both described as people of a “docile” nature, and also “liable to sudden bursts of passion.”<sup>66</sup> The Chimman Lal Report, the result of a commission appointed by the Colonial Government of India to investigate the conditions of Indian immigrants in the West Indies, referred to East Indians as “petulant children,” who “require firm and

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 39; 106.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>65</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1912-13*. British Guiana. Immigration Department. Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana: The Argosy Company, Ltd., 1913.

<sup>66</sup> Report to the Government of India on the Conditions of Indian Immigrants in Four British Colonies and Surinam—Report by Mr. James McNeill, Indian Civil Service and Mr. Chimman Lal, Part I: Trinidad and British Guiana (Chimman Lal Report), British Parliamentary Papers, Cd. 7744, 68-9.

tactful handling” as “a crowd of excited laborers may go to dangerous lengths.”<sup>67</sup> The colonial racial stereotyping changed with the constructed chronology of events. East Indians could not be seen as resisting their contractual bounds, thus in reportage, colonial authorities needed to make sense of events without changing the image of the colonial authoritative system. These new representations became the new go-to explanations for East Indian resistance, portraying what Marina Carter and Khal Torabully describe as the “seemingly smooth running of what was an essentially coercive system.”<sup>68</sup>

Colonial authorities saw violence as a symptom of East Indians’ proclivity to emotional outbursts and personal tiffs. The most notable example of how colonial riot narratives personalized causes in order to evade responsibility for systemic abuses was the Rose Hall “Riot” on 13 March 1913. The report on the events at Pln. Rose Hall cite the summons taken against seven laborers who persuaded other laborers not to go to work after they claimed that there was supposed to be promised holiday time at the end of the grinding season as the most immediate cause of the “riot.” The report described an East Indian crowd at the “ringleaders” hearings on 7 February as “in a nasty temper and threatening that there would be arrow if the defendants were convicted.” While the local IA asked the “ringleaders” to plead guilty, pay a fine, and go back to work on the estates, on 17 February, Mr. Smith, the estate manager, requested their transfer; permission was granted for the request, but no action was taken until 4 March, when the Police arrived for their transferal of Jangi Khan, who was described as someone the laborers “looked up to and thought much of.”<sup>69</sup> In this moment, the crowd of East Indians that gathered was described as “excited and threatening in their manner, a large number having [*bakia*] sticks,” and “angry and dangerous in their temper.”<sup>70</sup> By

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>68</sup> Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: An Anthology of Indian Labor Diaspora* (United Kingdom: Anthem Press, 2002), 51.

<sup>69</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1912-13.*

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

writing about the East Indians crowd that developed in such a manner, the report functioned to justify the shooting that later took place on 14 March, when the Police arrived for the arrest of five indentured laborers for “unlawfully using threats of violence.”<sup>71</sup> None of the five warrants were for the original “ringleaders,” however the crowd that developed on this day was reported to have conflated the transferal of the “ringleaders” with the arrests. Colonial authorities made the East Indian crowd a reactive, uncontrolled mass motivated by personal allegiances and vendettas. While these reports are written in a way that implied East Indian laborers had a voice, they deliberately denied authority to East Indians by depicting their motivations as emotional instead of logical. The fact that East Indians could choose to strike and resist was not within the colonial imagination, nor did repeated occurrences fit within their narrative of isolated incidents of passionate outburst.

Colonial reports personalized strike action by attributing conflict to personal vindication—they reduced East Indians deliberately motivated action to a local scale. For example, on 4 February 1913, when sixty shovel-men struck work on Pln. Skeldon, the complaint given to the ID was unfair wages, however an inquiry found that real reason for leaving work was “the arrest of two men for assaulting on overseer.”<sup>72</sup> By assigning the cause of strike to vendettas against select people, colonial authorities were able to offer band-aid solutions to temporarily quell accelerating sentiments. Many of the reports indicated a “feeling against a driver,” an authoritative figure of East Indian origin. Drivers were responsible for coercing and intimidating the workers to “produce a degree of acquiescence in the immigrant camp.”<sup>73</sup> The drivers were a colonial tool used to distance authorities from the responsibility to immediately inflict punishment. For instance, on Pln. Uitrug on 28 October 1914, East Indians “complained that they had been assaulted aback by a recently appointed driver or ‘Sardar’ and further that on the same evening two other immigrants had been beaten in the yard at

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Mangru, *A History of East Indian Resistance on the Guyana Sugar Estates*, 120.

the instigation of the same driver.”<sup>74</sup> The quickest solution was to dismiss the driver. The driver served a dual purpose in colonial society: on one hand, the driver was a link between the estate managers and East Indian laborers. Similar to the role that the ID played, the driver could translate the needs of and provide a model to other East Indians. On the other hand, the driver was a scapegoat for the colonial authorities to blame for complaints. The hierarchy between drivers and field workers fractured the appearance of solidarity amongst East Indians, since the reports focused on instances of conflict over peace.

Furthermore, the colonial documentation emphasized personal allegiance through descriptions of sectarian and caste divisions. It ascribed inter-communal clashes to geographic rivalries. For example, in June 1919 the IAG reported one of seven strikes from that year as “in consequence of a row among [East Indians], it seemed that there had been a dispute about the rates and the Madrasis had gone to work when the “Calcutta” immigrants refused, subsequently the “Calcuttans” had a “dinner,” and the Madrasis being left out, a Madras woman, who had lent her bucket for the occasion, demanded it back. This led to a scrimmage.”<sup>75</sup> As Pandey explains, one defining feature of the strike narrative is communalism. In the above example, the strike, which stemmed from a seemingly unbreachable community divide, played into “pre-existing loyalties and tendencies.”<sup>76</sup> Colonial authorities relegated new politico-social movements to innate and uncivilized responses. Adding to that, immigrants themselves were used as scapegoats. In 1900 on Pln. Blairmont, six immigrants assaulted another two “who had been chosen by the IA to perform some of the work so as to enable him to come to an opinion of its value,” depicting East Indians as unable to form a cohesive

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<sup>74</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1914-15*. British Guiana. Immigration Department. Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana: The Argosy Company, Ltd., 1915.

<sup>75</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1919*. British Guiana. Immigration Department. Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana: The Argosy Company, Ltd., 1920.

<sup>76</sup> Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, 63.

community and plagued by jealousy and violence.<sup>77</sup> Personal scuffles increased the justification for colonial oversight and regulation of the ‘native’ East Indians; while, their inability to form a community lessened the perception of East Indians as civilized.

Lastly, the colonial construction of uncivilized, East Indian traits manifested itself in the depiction of East Indian men’s treatment of women. The IAG reports portrayed East Indian men as oppressive in their use of violence against women and also weak through their portrayal as jealous and image obsessed. For instance, on Pln. Nonpariel in 1920, one of the many reasons the IAG gave for striking was that an overseer “roughly [handled] the women.”<sup>78</sup> In this complaint, the overseer was the subject of complaint and women the object of defense; in writing this narrative, violence was a gendered action used to further the stereotype of ‘native’ character, specifically a lack of restraint on sexual emotion. However, women were not always the object in complaints. In one strike in the 1910-11 period, the East Indian laborers “went to the manager to complain that the wife of one of their number had been found in the chamber of a ‘free’ man, who was consequently warned off the estate.”<sup>79</sup> In this instance, women were the subjects of the strike. When colonial authorities depicted how East Indian men policed women’s sexual activity, they de-masculinized them and depicted them as inferior because of their lack of control over their women. Both instances feature a lack of restraint of specifically gendered emotion. Paralleling that, in 1910-11, two strikes were “caused by the employment of men in what is known as the ‘weeding gang’ composed principally of women and weakly men, the complainants desiring to work with the stronger men.”<sup>80</sup> Similar to the above case, East Indian male laborers were de-masculinized through the portrayal of their

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<sup>77</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1900-01*. British Guiana. Immigration Department. Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana: C.K. Jardine, 1901.

<sup>78</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1920*. British Guiana. Immigration Department. Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana: The Argosy Company, Ltd., 1921.

<sup>79</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1910-11*. British Guiana. Immigration Department. Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana: The Argosy Company, Ltd., 1911.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

complaints as frivolous. Gendering the East Indian men like women furthered their infantilization and increased the perception of East Indians as in need of welfare provisions to facilitate transition to colonial life. By projecting this image of East Indians—emotive, infantile, uncivilized—colonial authorities effectively obscured resistance from the official narrative.

### **East Indians' expanded lifeworld**

Using E.P. Thompson's theory of English working class exploitation, I similarly frame East Indian class consciousness in a cultural and social formation as a relationship "based on the differences in legitimate power."<sup>81</sup> Demands for higher wages, and assaults on drivers and overseers, suggest that East Indian strikers were aware of their position within the plantation hierarchy. Their demands imply that they acknowledged their position as an "exploited class" and desired to change it. According to Thompson, "these experiences are handled in cultural terms and embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional form," meaning that class consciousness can be identified through practices.<sup>82</sup> East Indian strike action can be seen as a collective culture, a shared sense of experience and interests, that defined the boundaries of inclusion in a class and the class itself. There were tactics repeated across spatial and temporal boundaries: leave of work, complaints to IAs, and assault using *bakia sticks*. These strike tactics were specific to the East Indian sugar workers, who utilized the resources available to them and responded to their conditions, which demonstrates recognition of shared experience as the basis for their collective action.

Race also functioned as a resource for East Indians to think about their socio-economic position. The racialized labor system resulted in divergent socio-economic positions for the Black and Indo-Guianese, where the Black Guianese, by and large, occupied a higher socio-economic position

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<sup>81</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 10-11.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



due to their residence and employment in urban areas. The agricultural nature of work for East Indians, on the other hand, relegated them to the position of field laborers and separated them distinctly from urban spaces. Thus, the culture surrounding East Indian resistance had a specifically racial tinge: it was concerned with East Indians' position in the colony with a focus on constructing new social order in economic, cultural, and social spheres.

While East Indians in British Guiana retained what E.P. Thompson terms “a consciousness of an identity of interests as between all the diverse groups of working people and as against the interests of the other classes,” or recognition of shared positionality in the plantation system, they did not form formal organizations based around these community-patterns.<sup>83</sup> This is in large part due to the constraints of the plantation system that hindered both informal and formal group formation. Thus, the East Indian collectivity on the plantations can be viewed as a political community, as opposed to working class. East Indians had the cultural practices and ways of thinking that demonstrated how they self-defined their position as an exploited class, economically and politically. However, they lacked situational means to articulate that identity “as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed) to theirs.”<sup>84</sup> Namely, East Indian estate laborers never collectively organized or deliberately planned, but their tactical patterns demonstrate an unspoken collectivity.

East Indian demands for higher wages are the most salient example of how they desired to rise to a social class greater than the one given to them. Individual and *en masse* complaints to the IAs were an active path of resistance since they were still channels that laborers needed to fight managers and the planter class to retain, as outlined by Rodney.<sup>85</sup> Rodney further argues that the “bondsmen had opened up a channel of demonstrative protest, virtually constituting a picket line,” and

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>85</sup> Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People*, 152.

“[brought] their grievances into the public gaze.”<sup>86</sup> Both the Chimman Lal (1915) and Pillai-Tivary Commission (1924), written nearly ten years apart, primarily addressed the issue of wages, recommending higher wages for East Indian laborers. The Pillai-Tivary Commission, a report commissioned by the Colonial Government of India to examine the possibility of resumed Indian immigration to British Guiana, uses greater amounts of testimony as evidence. It summarized that East Indians “all complain of high prices of food-stuffs and other necessities such as cloth, the hard task-work and low wages. Their wages, [East Indians] point out, are barely sufficient to get full meals, let alone decent clothing.”<sup>87</sup> The majority of demands for higher wages referenced basic necessities, and seemed to be primarily about survival: food and clothes were necessary to carry out laboring tasks. Field-laborers were paid on a piece-work system, meaning that wages were not fixed and instead dependent on factors like the season, variations in weather, the working capacity of two men, and the soil variations. Therefore, colonial authorities set up the wage system so that it was nearly impossible to collectively advocate for higher wages. When specific task-gangs struck work, they were advocating for higher wages for their task-gang specifically and not for the estate working force as a whole. Furthermore, wages are written about in the colonial reportage in isolation from the other demands that would have given greater depth to the extent to which higher wages would impact East Indians’ social position.

Wages, as a principle in the indenture system, tied the indentured East Indians laborers to the plantation. Thus, in the reports of striking indentured laborers, colonial authorities only saw East Indians as wanting to survive within the system, rather than seeking to expand their livelihoods. By looking specifically at free laborers’ complaints about “insufficient” wages, it is evident how free laborers valued their work and wages differently than when they were part of the indenture system.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Pillai-Tivary Report, 154.

For example, in the 1911-12 review period, the IAG describes how free immigrants came to the office to complain of “insufficient” wages; in 1918, two separate strikes were specifically by free immigrants on Pln. La Bonne Intention and Diamond. In most cases concerning free laborer complaints, the wages were found to be fair; however in one case in the 1910-11 period, there was a slight increase in the rates of free laborers.<sup>88</sup> Free East Indians expressed a desire to obtain wages beyond a living wage; their wages were intended to be the key to expanding their place in colonial society by allowing them to broaden their economic opportunity. Conversely, indentured laborers could not petition for higher wages alongside the free East Indian laborers since their wages were limited by the indenture contract.

Free East Indians saw land as a way that they could expand their social position. One way in which the colonial system limited participation in public life was through stringent voting requirements. The colonial authorities, as a result of the influence of the planter class, structured voting laws in British Guiana to effectively disenfranchise East Indians through two clauses: literacy and land ownership qualifications.<sup>89</sup> The voting laws required that that voters needed to be at least 21 years of age, have no legal incapacity, know how to read and write a language, and have not received within 21 months previous to registrations any relief from public or parochial funds. In addition, voters residing in the country could only be registered if they owned three acres of land or a house of the annual rent value of at least 96 dollars, took on rent of at least 6 acres of land or a house of the annual rental, of 192 dollars, had an annual income of 480 dollars and 6 months residence in the colony, or paid direct taxes at least 20 dollars coupled with residence. By 1922, only 428 of 41,000 (one percent) East Indian men were registered to vote. For comparison, there were 5,000 total voters in the colony: 563 Europeans, 482 Portuguese, 96 Chinese, and 3,396 “Blacks and colored.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1910-11.*

<sup>89</sup> Literacy will be addressed in the next chapter.

<sup>90</sup> Pillai-Tivary, Report, 67.

Carter and Torabully note how after emancipation the ex-slaves saw prosperity through freedom from the land, as many migrated into the urban centers, where the land requirements to vote were lower.<sup>91</sup> However, East Indians saw “a path to prosperity and status through the land,” meaning that many attempted to gain rights and ownership over land in order to gain access and participate in the public sphere.<sup>92</sup> Ownership of land allowed East Indians to re-position themselves socially and distance them from their former labels as indentured, laborer, or immigrant. Land ownership was more easily available to East Indians because of the four government Land Settlement Schemes, which offered small allotments on commutation of return passage rights. After 1898, colonial authorities relaxed the Crown Land regulations, which reduced the price of land to 15 cents an acre; a price many immigrants capitalized on to start buying land and cultivating rice.<sup>93</sup>

Rice cultivation functioned as ways to achieve economic independence. A practice taken from the small-scale cultivation during indentureship, rice plots were a means by which East Indians could build their own economic and political capital. Rice plots were a coveted asset in 1916, when a strike by an indentured shovel-gang was said to have occurred as a result of a rumor that an indentured immigrant acquired “a piece of land on the opposite bank of the river and desired to work a half for the estate...and the other half on his own land.”<sup>94</sup> Land ownership allowed East Indians to form an economic livelihood of their own; for the indentured it represented an aspiration for settlement after the contract ended, and for the free East Indians it became their mode of claiming rights and forming new social practices. Ownership of land would have allowed East Indians to leave behind the institutions of life on the plantation—community, religion, and family—and start afresh and mold their own institutions.

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<sup>91</sup> Carter and Torabully, *Coolitude*, 103.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>94</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1916*. British Guiana. Immigration Department. Georgetown, Demerara, British Guiana: The Argosy Company, Ltd., 1917.

East Indians aimed to reclaim their spaces through land acquisition and their time by demanding for fairer working hours. The Pillai-Tivary Report summarized the conditions of work as “long hours,” where during the grinding season the work-day can extend from 3 A.M. to 10 P.M.<sup>95</sup> Because the plantation labor system monopolized their time, East Indians’ social position and identity within the colony was reduced to “laborer.” In other words, demands for a shorter workday would sever East Indians from the totality of the plantation system and would give them leisure time to pursue activities that would build other aspects of their identities. East Indians already used to limited leisure time to build a community outside of the plantation system. For instance, during the indenture period, East Indians commonly visited “friends” from other estates on the weekend. As demonstrated, control over their free time was a key step in attaining social agency. Mahase recounts how in Trinidad, indentured laborers resisted the colonial authorities in order to celebrate Muharram or Hosay.<sup>96</sup> Through incorporating traditions, such as the story of the *Ramayana*, into their everyday experience, East Indians re-claimed their identities, and transformed their traditions to better represent their new and aspired societal positions in the colony.<sup>97</sup> By demanding time off East Indians directly pushed back against the colonial vision of their lives as one dimensional. Moreover, the fact that time off for festivals and holidays is highly valued speaks to how East Indians began to construct a lifeworld and community outside of plantation society and against colonial instruction. By severing their lives from the plantation system, East Indians began to mold a vision of life that the colonial authorities could not directly control.

Revolving around ideas of family, the new social order developed by East Indians partly resisted and partly aligned with the imposed colonial vision. Upon arrival in the colony, East Indians developed new bonds that allowed them to reconstitute community. The re-construction of the

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<sup>95</sup> Pillai-Tivary Report, 155.

<sup>96</sup> Mahase, “Plenty a dem run away!,” 470.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

institution of the family took hold in the practice of *jahaji*, or “shipmate.” Parbattie Ramsarran describes *jahaji* as both an economic unit and a “a protective family unit governed by the status of the indenture contract,” meaning that it was a way to collectively overcome the circumstances of the indentured contract.<sup>98</sup> *Jahaji* familial units followed similar rules of the consanguineous family, like forbidding inter-marriage and replication of patriarchal hierarchies.<sup>99</sup> *Jahaji* family units represented the extended family structure, one more akin to the inter-generational unit indentured laborers would have experienced in India. The strikes that started over “personal” relationships were linked to this social order developed by East Indians. For instance, there was a case in the 1907-08 review period, where a laborer complained on behalf of two other laborers that they were assaulted by a driver or foreman. There was an acute sense of solidarity between the laborers of the same task gang; in many cases of abuse of one, the entire task-gang would strike. Similarly, in the 1903-04 review period, the IAG outlines the cause of a “serious strike” at Pln. Friends due to the arrest of the ringleaders. The potential separation of indentured immigrants would have fractured the communal unit and is demonstrative of how important *jahaji* bonds were in developing a community that was not determined by the bounds and regulations of the plantation system.

While East Indians saw *jahaji* as essential to develop a sense of solidarity amongst themselves, they did shift toward the nuclear family unit as a societal building block. The “coolie lines” took on greater significance for East Indians: the home represented a condition of “unfreedom,” whereas for colonial authorities it represented the downfall of family life and “immorality,” as observed in the Chimman Lal and Pillai-Tivary reports. East Indians complained about how the “coolie” lines or ranges, which were inherited structures from slavery, were “[insufficient] of accommodation and damp and insanitary surroundings...some describe the rooms in the ranges as no

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<sup>98</sup> Ramsarran, “The Indentured contract and its Impact on Labor Relationship and Community Reconstruction in British Guiana,” 179.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

better than ‘pig styes,’ ‘cattle sheds,’ or ‘stables.’”<sup>100</sup> The “coolie lines” were typically single-storied buildings, fifty to a hundred feet long, fourteen feet broad and fifteen feet high, split into five or ten rooms. Each room housed one family or three “bachelors.” The accommodation on the estate did not give much mobility to East Indians to construct a new domestic life. The cramped quarters, lack of privacy, and inadequate maintenance on the “coolie lines” deprived the East Indian resident laborers of basic humanity. Living quarters on the estates were merely a location to sleep rather than a symbolic institution of domestic life, or the home. East Indians wanted to move off the coolie lines in particular because the lack of privacy was deemed unsuitable for family life: “when words whispered on one side of the partition may be overheard on the other. In these circumstances, it is not at all surprising to find all decency of a family life destroyed.”<sup>101</sup> Because family life was included in the political vision it fostered a new relationship between the East Indian family and the colonial government. Since the nuclear family was not a unit seen in India, its presence in East Indian discourse in British Guiana is a specifically colonial vision; by applying the model of the ideal colonial family to their community, East Indians could be the beneficiaries of economic gains, political rights, and social participation. The Pillai-Tivary report mentioned how starting in 1919-20, the estates built new houses to accommodate married couples and their children. Thus, this was a way of claiming political space for themselves. Through re-organizing their community around the nuclear family, East Indians achieved two goals: they pushed a new value system onto the next generation of East Indians and they projected an image of stability to colonial authorities that allowed them to initiate the process of social re-positioning.

However, the construction of a new domestic space did not benefit all East Indians equally; men, in particular, were the predominant beneficiary of a new domestic space. Upon arrival in the

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<sup>100</sup> Pillai-Tivary Report, 155.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

colony, East Indian women gained agency by acquisition of their own wages. Many of the women who emigrated from India were single women, who would have come from a laboring class; few wives or families emigrated as a unit. The estate classes saw the single women who emigrated as a threat to the stability of the indenture system, because many of them chose to have multiple partners, or co-habit without formal marriage. Moreover, they saw also the relatively smaller number of women to men as a threat to the long-term viability of the system.<sup>102</sup> To lessen the threat that the position of women in the colony posed, colonial authorities dampened their sense of agency in their domestic and sexual preferences. The colonial authorities relegated the causes of women's "sexual laxity" to their environmental influences: the "sudden freedom from all social restraints of a village life, chaotic intermixture of different classes and individuals from various provinces, the condition of life on an estate, and the non-recognition of Indian marriages."<sup>103</sup> It was in the colonial authorities' interests to clamp down on the perceived "immorality" of women to increase the long-term viability of the indenture system. However, it is evident that East Indian men also desired greater control over East Indian women. The Chimman Lal Report stated that:

the risk in allowing women to absent themselves from work is that both married women and those who would otherwise remain loyal to an irregular union are more likely to be tempted by these men. Experience shows that the authority of husband or protector is not always able to overcome a woman's disinclination to work and even apart from possible temptations from outside it is frequently better for all parties that this authority should be reinforced.<sup>104</sup>

In this instance, the interests of colonial authorities and East Indian men were aligned. Both aimed to limit the amount of freedom women had in order to implement a more stable domestic system.

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<sup>102</sup> In 1911, the ratio of women to men was 73:100; Chimman Lal Report, 314.

<sup>103</sup> Pillai-Tivary Report, 45.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.



However, colonial authorities aimed to increase the role of the husband as a protector while keeping women as part of the labor system, because they were still viewed as primary economic and productive bodies, whereas East Indian men aimed to remove women entirely from the labor sphere. The Pillai-Tivary Report mentioned that estate managers fined East Indian men if their wives did not work.<sup>105</sup> The estate justified this by proclaiming that all residents of the estate needed to contribute; this demonstrates how East Indian men's motives in re-introducing the totality of the familial unit were at odds with the estate.<sup>106</sup> Borrowing from Carole Pateman and Prabhu P. Mohapatra, the "formation of civil society and the state through a contract between free males presupposed another contract that explicitly subordinated woman to man": this was the sexual contract.<sup>107</sup> Thus, by pushing women into the domestic sphere, East Indian men could establish their sex rights to East Indian women's bodies and forge a new domestic space, as seen in strikes that started as a result of jealousy or domestic trouble.<sup>108</sup> Women, however, also participated in strike action, which demonstrates how they may have not shared the same political vision.

Women on the colonial estates played key roles in strike action since the mid-1800s. In 1872, indentured women protested with their husbands and other men on Pln. Devonshire Castle.<sup>109</sup> And in 1915, women struck alongside men on Pln. Success after determining the rate for weeding and trashing was too low. In 1903, on Pln. Friends in Berbice, an indentured woman, Salamea, "[had] been on the estate for three years." A driver testified that "she told her shipmates on the Thursday to go fight....Salamea, I hear, urge the coolies who had assembled to fight."<sup>110</sup> The *jahaji* relationships between East Indian men also applied to women (*jahaji bahin*).<sup>111</sup> Because of the gendered

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<sup>105</sup> Pillai-Tivary Report, 25.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Prabhu P. Mohapatra, "Restoring the Family: Wife Murders and the Making of the Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labour in the British Caribbean Colonies, 1860-1920," *Studies in History* 11 no. 2, (1995): 229.

<sup>108</sup> As aforementioned, see page 18-19.

<sup>109</sup> Lomarsh Rooparine as quoted in Aliyah Khan, "Protest and Punishment: Indo-Guyanese Women and Organized Labour," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 12, (2018): 271.

<sup>110</sup> Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People*, 157.

<sup>111</sup> Aliyah Khan, "Protest and Punishment," 275.

nature of plantation work, where women were assigned to weeding and other low-paying jobs, women weeding gangs dominated the landscape. These became homosocial spaces that allowed women to practice their autonomy and develop identities outside of the patriarchal landscape. In 1916, twenty Madras women, “took the opportunity” to strike and demand higher rates for weeding.<sup>112</sup> A similar strike occurred in 1920, when thirty female “immigrants” on Pln. Diamond asserted that the wage of weeding and moulding was insufficient.<sup>113</sup> While the evidence of widespread women-led strike-action is limited, these instances suggest that women were both acclimated to and desired to have a role in public life. In asserting their just wages, laboring women demonstrated that they wanted to establish a permanent role for themselves in colonial dialogue.

Women were thus a major terrain of contestation: in the development of a colonial class, women would have lost the autonomy that they maintained for themselves through migration. The family, and by extension the community, formed a greater part of the ideal that East Indians men strived to create. On one hand, the imagined political and cultural role of East Indian laborers was progressive, as expressed in a greater desire for a political and economic role that would give East Indians status mobility. On the other, it entrenched static power hierarchies, as demonstrated through the imagination of the household, family and women. This political vision may have been projected by the hegemonic voices within the community: laboring males.

## Conclusion

In examining the colonial ideal for East Indian labor, I argued that colonial authorities used the labor contract to define their relationship toward East Indians. The contractual nature of exchange between the Colonial Government of India and that of British Guiana considered East

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<sup>112</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1916.*

<sup>113</sup> *Report of the immigration agent general for the year 1920.*

Indians as solely sources of labor. The contractual relationship in turn influenced the demands of East Indians in their fight for an expanded place in the colony. Secondly, this chapter inspected the colonial riot narrative, which constructed and perpetuated a racialized image of East Indians that was contradictory. In early reports, East Indians were child-like, docile laborers, while after the escalation in the frequency of strike action, they were prone to violent outbursts which needed to be controlled. These contradictions opened up space for East Indians to contest their status and create their own imaginary of life in the colony. Lastly, this chapter considered how the grievances put forth by East Indian strikers developed an imaginary beyond that of survival on the plantation estates. Taken in sum, the East Indian grievances may be read as expressing a clear imagination of their own political participation, economic prosperity and social order.

While the East Indian estate laborers did not form a class in themselves, their expressed collective culture as agriculturally inclined. The colonial perception of East Indian laborers on the estates as “thrifty,” and “self-preserving” became the norm to describe East Indians for both the powerful classes (colonial authorities, the planter class) and the emerging middle-classes. Despite articulating a clear vision of what they wanted their life in the colony to be like, the estate laborers’ lack of mass and collective action as determined by structural impediments limited their vision’s implementation. As the laborers slowly moved off the estates and as more East Indians were born inside the colony, a small East Indian middle-class emerged took the place of the IAG and colonial authorities as interlocutors, rendering the East Indian laborers’ voice once again obscured.

## Chapter 2: Forming a Cultural Enclave

### Introduction

Starting in the early 1930s, another wave of “disturbances” swept British Guiana. Characterized by their spontaneity and militancy, the “disturbances” shook the colonial hierarchy. They penetrated urban and rural areas and included both workers of East Indian and African descent. The rural disturbances, however, occurred on the tail-end of the strikes in urban centers by the Black industrial workers. The industrial strikes, organized by the British Guiana Labour Union (BGLU), were infused with symbols that harkened back to Black struggles and achievement in the colony. Slogans like “Emancipate yourself from Imperialist and Capitalist economic slavery,” were common, and rallies were held on significant days, like 1 August which coincided with the anniversary of Emancipation.<sup>114</sup> Colonial authorities characterized the rural labor disturbances, which started in 1934 on Pln. Leonora when 600 shovel men quit and complained to their manager about low wages and abuse by drivers, in contrast to the urban strikes: they featured mass collective action, and no defined leadership or organizational support.<sup>115</sup> The common grievance between the strikes was poor treatment on the estates and low wages. And while East Indian sugar factory workers and African cane-cutters collaborated, the disturbances on the estates was by and large dominated by the East Indian workers.<sup>116</sup>

Sparked by widespread labor unrest, the Colonial Office’s West Indies Royal Commission (Moyne Commission) investigated the broader socio-economic conditions of the Caribbean. The Commission heard the grievances of the strikers through their respective colonially identified “natural leaders.” For the Black urban workers, it was the BGLU. However, East Indian sugar workers

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<sup>114</sup> BGLU was quoted in Nigel O. Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean: The Social Origins of Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Labour Movement* (Princeton, NJ; Kingston, Jamaica; Oxford: Ian Randle, 2001), 338.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

had no clear organizer or leader, and so the Moyne Commission went to the British Guiana East Indian Association's (BGEIA) leaders, because of their relatively privileged status as English-speaking urban professionals, despite the organization's absence from the action on the estates. The BGEIA, founded in 1916 by Indians who migrated off the plantations and into the urban center, was the most active East Indian formal political organization throughout the twenties.

The urban-based East Indians ascended to this position after their parents or grandparents acquired small plots of land to cultivate rice through an indentureship era bounty system that issued \$50 bounties to Indians who chose to settle rather than repatriate. The landowners' children were eventually able to leave the villages because of the accumulated wealth from administration of various jobs.<sup>117</sup> These landowners stressed the importance of English education to their children, some of whom then joined the civil service or trained in professional fields, and migrated off the colonial peripheries.<sup>118</sup> The children of the landowners—Joseph Ruhomon and J.A. Luckhoo—migrated into the cities during the early twentieth century and formed the BGEIA.<sup>119</sup> Joseph Ruhomon was born in 1873 on Pln. Albion to John Ruhomon, an indentured laborer. Joseph Ruhomon converted to Christianity early in his life and became a journalist. He published *India; The Progress of Her People at Home and Abroad* in 1894, which is considered to be the first intellectual Indo-Guianese work. J.A. Luckhoo, born in 1887, was the first Indo-Guianese to enter the legislature in 1916.<sup>120</sup> Less is known about Luckhoo, but he became a barrister after studying in England in 1912.<sup>121</sup>

Starting in the mid-1920s, the BGEIA overshadowed the voice of East Indians on the estates by negotiating with the Colonial Government for the resumption of immigration from India to “colonize” British Guiana. Throughout the 1920s, the BGEIA wanted to increase East Indian

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<sup>117</sup> Jobs such as moneylender, shopkeeper and rumshop proprietor, and through the purchase of abandoned sugar estates in Essequibo; Mangru, *A History of East Indian Resistance*, 200.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>120</sup> Clem Seecharan, *Joseph Ruhomon's India* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press), 2.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 4.

immigration into the colony to create “an Indian colony.”<sup>122</sup> Despite being founded and having goals suited to a political moment nearly 20 years earlier, the BGEIA submitted their memorandum and testimony to the Moyne Commission, positioning itself as an interlocutor. The main aims of the organization were “to unite the members of the East Indian race in all parts of the colony for representative purposes” and “to protect the general interests of East Indians and to obtain redress for them in established cases of grievances.”<sup>123</sup> However, the organization also had ideological ties to the *swaraj* [self-rule] movement in India. The leaders of the BGEIA saw the *swaraj* movement as tied to their own; an ideal for diasporic East Indians to aspire towards.<sup>124</sup> Luckhoo was intrigued by the idea of “free, self-governing” Indian communities abroad.<sup>125</sup> Luckhoo wanted to demonstrate that East Indians were the engine behind the colony’s development and wanted to strengthen the bond to India so that “she could take pride in ‘the great destiny’ that awaited Indians in the colony.”<sup>126</sup> However, they abandoned this idea due to low sugar prices, unemployment and low wages. This failure led to major concerns over the status of Indians within the colony, especially as they began to strike over their wage rates and working conditions; the organization began to focus on forming a “powerful electoral force” of East Indians to “secure representatives of East Indian nationality in the [British Guianese] Legislature.”<sup>127</sup> The BGEIA wanted to remold the East Indian collective, transforming East Indians from docile indentured laborers into a political conscious collective integrated into a wider diasporic body.

The BGEIA claimed to speak on behalf of the workers, ironically, at the expense of their actual demands. Direct action on the estates was not within the mandate of the BGEIA, which instead

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>123</sup> Peter Ruhomon, *Centenary History*, as quoted in Rambarack, B., *British Guiana East Indian Association. Centenary celebration of the arrival of Indians to British Guiana (1838 - 1938)* (San Juan, Trinidad and Tobago: Chakra Pub. House, 2001), 235-36.

<sup>124</sup> Clem Seecharan, *Mother India's Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s* (Kingston; Miami; Ian Randle Publishers, 2011), 68.

<sup>125</sup> Seecharan, *Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity*, 121.

<sup>126</sup> Luckhoo as quoted in Seecharan, *Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity*, 127.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid; Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean*, 115.

focused on self-directing the “inner sphere” of East Indian society, to borrow from Partha Chatterjee. Chatterjee argues that nationalist movements have been considered “*political* movements much too literally,” and describes how early anticolonial nationalist movements in Bengal, in eastern India, started before these movements launched their formal challenges to colonial rule by directing the “spiritual” (in contrast to “material”) domain.<sup>128</sup> The “spiritual” domain included issues that would cement expressions of “essential” cultural difference, like education or the status of women.<sup>129</sup> In his view, the nation created through claiming the “spiritual” domain is already a form of nationalism. In the British Guianese context, the BGEIA focused on creating alternative structures for East Indians—religious and community-oriented education, family-built housing, and political representation—that implied that their cultures were a fixed aspect of their identity. In doing so, the BGEIA aimed to consolidate East Indians into a homogenous national polity.

This chapter argues that the BGEIA proposed a new model of citizenship, which resisted creolization and pushed for the “enclavization” of East Indians, to the Colonial Government in their attempt to consolidate a homogenous East Indian community. The BGEIA sought a fuller version of colonial citizenship that would recognize the legitimacy of East Indian cultural practices. Recognition of East-Indian cultural practices foregrounded a vision of citizenship that included social structures outside of the Anglo-Saxon and creole norms. They achieved this by drawing distinct lines between the East Indians and the Black Guianese economically and culturally. The BGEIA’s deployment of culture to define East Indians’ political consciousness was a deliberate choice to stage the boundaries of who would benefit from the alternative forms of citizenship. To borrow from Aisha Khan, the “enclave” created by the urban middle-class East Indians was not fixed but instead activated. It explained why the East Indians were a collective and also functioned as the means by which

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> I will refer to the “spiritual” domain as the “inner sphere” to better suit the Caribbean context; Ibid.

they could improve their living situation. It was intimately tied with political consciousness since culture was the lens by which these East Indians thought about how they would navigate their societal position in the colony.

Yet on the other hand, when the BGEIA claimed to represent all East Indians in British Guiana, they actually muddled the boundaries between speaking on behalf of and speaking for. The middle-class urban elite aimed to further their own place in mainstream society and legitimize their own place in the face of colonial power. In doing so, they reinforced the paternalistic relationship vis-à-vis the colonial elite and cemented the East Indian masses' marginalized position in colonial society. Through pushing for the codification of these alternative social structures, urban-based East Indians reinforced the racialized colony hierarchy, ultimately supporting the colonial authority's system.

This chapter will first outline the development of Black creole political consciousness, demonstrating why East Indians did not join that broad political movement, and early East Indian middle-class political consciousness, demonstrating how the organization's ideology originated in a different politico-economic moment. This section will serve to demonstrate the extent to which East Indians resisted creolization. The following section will explore the BGEIA's testimony to the Moyne Commission, demonstrating how the organization projected a cultural enclave onto East Indians at large. This section explores the deployment of culture in a vision of citizenship in three ways: in the domestic realm, in the civic realm, and in the political realm. Then, this chapter will discuss the BGEIA's claim to represent all East Indians and consider the visions proposed by smaller organizations. Finally, this chapter will return to the Moyne Commission and account for its impact on East Indian political expression. As the BGEIA became more vocal about their aims, they created a standard position for East Indians in the colony and dominated the terms of discussion over what East Indian identity meant.



### Creole v. East Indian political consciousness

The East Indian community was not integrated into the labor movement of the 1920s. The first registered labor union, the BGLU, a predominantly urban and Black supported union led by Hubert Critchlow, dominated the political discourse during the decade. This movement was inspired by Garveyism, Jamaican Marcus Garvey's political doctrine that advocated for the formation of self-governing Black nations in Africa and the Caribbean.<sup>130</sup> Garveyism interpreted economic inequality as a result of inadequate power and representation. Garvey thought that there could only be changes in political policies in favor of Blacks in the Caribbean, when Black individuals advanced to the top of the colonial hierarchy. Therefore, the BGLU focused its efforts on mobilizing and uplifting the Black-creole communities in British Guiana using a Garveyism inspired race-first dialogue to explain the condition of workers in the colony. Nigel Bolland argues that this ideology was "deeply rooted in the political culture of the region," as a way to interpret colonial reality.<sup>131</sup> The connections between Garveyism and the BLGU are profound: Critchlow actively encouraged members of the BGLU to join Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and used Garvey's language in his own organization.<sup>132</sup> Critchlow also actively promoted the regionalization of the Labour movement. On 12 and 14 January 1926, Critchlow organized the First British Guiana and West Indies Labour Conference in Georgetown.<sup>133</sup> Delegates from Trinidad and Surinam attended the conference to discuss the possibility of a federal labor organization. Critchlow, a "regionalist in his thinking," considered inter-colony cooperation as the key to achieve change for workers.<sup>134</sup>

The BGLU's rhetoric utilized the prism of the colonial racial hierarchy to explain the

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<sup>130</sup> For more information on Garveyism in the Caribbean see: Adam Ewing, "Caribbean Labour Politics in the Age of Garvey, 1918–1938," *Race & Class* 55, no. 1 (July 2013): 23–45; Adam Ewing, "An Ethiopian Tent: Garveyism and the Roots of Caribbean Labor Radicalism," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 10:9 (October 2017): 188–216; Adam Ewing, *The Age of Garvey: How a Jamaican Activist Created a Mass Movement and Changed Global Black Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2014).

<sup>131</sup> Bolland as quoted in Ewing "Caribbean Labour Politics in the Age of Garvey," 44.

<sup>132</sup> Ewing, "Caribbean Labour Politics in the Age of Garvey," 43.

<sup>133</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean*, 348.

<sup>134</sup> Gerald C Horne, *Cold War in a Hot Zone: The United States Confronts Labor and Independence Struggles in the British West Indies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 16.

continual subjugation of Blacks in the Caribbean while the white elite continued to profit. The BGLU helped to develop the political-racial category “Black” in Caribbean creole society that drew on the experiences of collective trauma of slavery, an amorphous heritage in continental Africa, and continued experience of colorism. This politico-racial category was not colony specific but generated a diasporic imaginary of Blacks across the entire West Indies. In this ideology, East Indians were regarded as another oppressed group, but there were not substantial efforts to incorporate them into the movement. Critchlow even considered East Indian laborers in British Guiana to be a “menace to the other workers of the country,” because they were “willing to work cheaper than the colored man.”<sup>135</sup> Within this rhetoric, East Indians did not have space to make demands based on their history and racialized socio-economic position; they were outside of the diasporic space of belonging. At the same time, East Indians also sought to distance themselves from the Black-Guyanese imaginary because of their own racial prejudices. The two communities, African and East Indian, widened as the calls for economic and political rights were intertwined with rhetoric that inadvertently reinforced the colonial racial hierarchy in the attempt to invert it. While the BGLU called for universal social and political rights, like full adult suffrage, that would have benefitted East Indians, the urban middle-class East Indians did not speak on this subject out of the fear that they would become outnumbered in their electorate.<sup>136</sup>

Suffrage reform gained traction after the constitutional revision of 1928, when the Dutch-influenced constitution was replaced with a British Crown Colony constitutional system.<sup>137</sup> Under the new constitution, power was concentrated in the position of the governor. The new constitution eliminated the ability to elect a majority to govern in the Legislative Council in the country since representatives were appointed rather than elected. While the franchise was expanded to include

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<sup>135</sup> Hubert Critchlow as quoted in Horne, *Cold War in Hot Zone*, 17.

<sup>136</sup> Seecharan, *Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity*, 208.

<sup>137</sup> Ishmael, *The Guyana Story: From Earliest Times to Independence*.

women, conditions for suffrage rights remained stringent.<sup>138</sup> The BGLU claimed that “nothing short of adult suffrage and the sweeping away from all qualifications for elections as a member of the Legislature will assure to labor sufficient control of the Legislature to ensure adequate laws for the protection of the proletariat.”<sup>139</sup> In their vision, the future of the labor conditions were tied with adequate representation in the political system. The economic rights that the union was advocating for, such as higher wages for the Georgetown dockworkers, would only be realized through changes in the political system and electoral politics that the union itself was viewed as responsible for initiating. The BGEIA did not join in these calls. Instead, they supported expanding the franchise to those who could read and write in an Indian language, and printing ballots in various Indian languages.<sup>140</sup> Their focus on an Indian constituency demonstrated their exclusive focus on expanding the East Indian political leverage. Luckhoo and Ruhomon, two of the founders of the BGEIA, deployed race-specific rhetoric in their resistance to creolization.

Luckhoo and Ruhomon focused their early writings on drawing clear distinctions between Black and East Indian people. Their cultural claims focused on advancing East Indians as a separate group to ensure political privileges. For instance, in 1919 Luckhoo published an address in *Timebri*, the Journal of the Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society, that examined East Indians’ collective and foundational experiences in the colony. He explained that East Indians were “brought to a distant land and subjected to different conditions of living, many of them rudely snatched from ties of home and affection.”<sup>141</sup> Through reference to the *kala pani* or ‘dark waters’ passage, Luckhoo established the foundational myth that cemented the East Indian experience in the colony as separate from creole peoples. By evoking imagery of an involuntary migration, Luckhoo also created an

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> CO111/687/4

<sup>140</sup> Seecharan, *Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity*, 216.

<sup>141</sup> Edward Luckhoo, “The East Indians in British Guiana.” *Timebri, The Journal of the Royal Agricultural and Commercial Society*, Vol. VI Third Series, (September 1919).

emotional tie to India as a romanticized homeland and implied that the colony could not measure up to the Indian ideal. Such a claim implies that native-born generations continued to feel a disconnect or alienation from creolizing influences. However, Luckhoo admitted that the colonial system caused East Indians to have an isolated experience:

the fault was not entirely [theirs]. The colonial Indian who thus merges himself in the vast ocean of inferior classes is more often than otherwise a victim of circumstances. His condition is the direct result of the unsolved difficulties in the question of Indian education in which alone lies the remedy for these conditions.<sup>142</sup>

Luckhoo placed the East Indian into the role of the passive victim of the colonial environment that pushed his spirit and honor down. The East Indian “upper strata” viewed African influence as degrading creole culture, specifically cultural codes and morals. The “vast ocean of inferior classes” euphemized the Black Guianese, who were seen as inferior both due to notions of colorism brought over from Indian society and the more recent conception that Black Guianese were not connected to an ancestral homeland. The difference Luckhoo constructed between the African and East Indian community is sharp: he deployed rhetoric that implied a difference in how ‘civilized’ both groups were and mentioned how the Indian ‘civilization’ was the way to uplift East Indians in creole colonies. In this view, East Indians achieved their “high and noble destiny” through individual determination to withstand creolization and keep culture authentic. Luckhoo ended his essay with a call to “appeal to the motherland to recognize and keep in touch with her sons who have emigrated to this colony, so that she may look across the ocean with pride at the chances that lie open to her sons and the great destiny,” speaking directly to East Indians, he projected the idea of India into the collective East Indian psyche.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

The focus of his essay was on the connection between East Indians in the colony, and India. Luckhoo also stressed how East Indians in the colony needed to reform their place in order to live up to the Indian ideal. In his essay, he identified the East Indian man as inherently an agricultural being. Luckhoo implied an inevitable separation between the settled East Indian and the rest of creole society: “his natural instincts lead him to the soil and...as soon as his term of indenture has expired and he once more breathes the air of freedom, he turns with glad heart to mother earth.”<sup>144</sup> It is notable that “mother earth” is used instead of “Mother India,” since the essay is written in 1921, at the height of *swaraj* movement. Aside from justifying inclusion in the colonial economic system, Luckhoo also justified East Indian settlement post-indenture, in lieu of repatriation. Conceived as an agricultural class, Luckhoo implied little geographic or economic mobility for East Indians individually.

Also, in *Timebri*, Joseph Ruhomon attempted to demystify the “Creole East Indian.” He surmised as to why East Indians had not advanced economically or socially. Ruhomon held similar beliefs to Luckhoo, notably that East Indians were being held down by the colonial government. However, Ruhomon placed the blame on the cultural attributes of East Indians:

The truth is the average creole East Indian is not given to high aspirations, nor is he stirred or enthused by great ideals...he is frigidly unresponsive to demands for action which has made heroes of individuals and turned the feeble stream of a struggling race out into the ocean of high endeavor.<sup>145</sup>

Ruhomon portrayed East Indians as “unresponsive” to opportunities for advancement within the colony. At the time of writing, political options were limited to the urban Black labor unions, like the BGLU; Ruhomon recognized what the movement had done for the Afro-Guianese as a collective

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Joseph Ruhomon, “Creole East Indian,” *Timebri: The Royal Journal of Agricultural and Commercial Society*, Vol VII Third Series, (August 1921).

and for the individuals at the forefront of the political movement, like Critchlow. Cognizant of how East Indians could not and did not want to join the movement, Ruhomon did not antagonize the African population for their rigid barriers to entry into their political movement. He instead attributed the apolitical character of East Indians to the fact that “the Government does not wish to see a literate Indian population; or it may be that in the interest of a certain class of employers of labor it recognizes the expediency of keeping this people at such a mental standard as to make them practically incapable of extending their outlook beyond the field of agricultural labor.”<sup>146</sup> Ruhomon shifted his attention to analyze the colonial power’s collusion with the large planters and identified this relationship as the main antagonistic force. In this view, colonial authorities treated East Indians as a separate type of citizen—a temporary laborer—and thus Ruhomon concluded that the privileges of citizenship were not institutionalized.

Ruhomon and Luckhoo both identified problems that originated in the indentureship period. Thus, the BGEIA’s leaders specified East Indians’ problems that were distinct from the universal issues, like franchise and economic rights, that the creole movement took on. The urban middle-class East Indian leaders focused on the lack of adequate governmental representation, the pitiful state of education in rural areas, and the delegitimization of social structures in East Indian communities. Without the means to become fully recognized as East Indian citizens, the urban middle-class needed to look toward efforts to “lift the race to a higher plane of thought and action,” in the words of Ruhomon, outside what was being offered by the colonial government and by their fellow citizens.<sup>147</sup>

The philosophy borne out of the 1917 moment continued into the thirties. The May 1938 edition of the *Indian Opinion*, the Official Organ of the BGEIA, commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

anniversary of the advent of East Indians in British Guiana. As part of this edition, Charles Ramkisson Jacob, the then president, published an article entitled, “The Achievements and Aims of Indians,” where he proposed a vision for the future of East Indians in the colony. Using similar language to the founders of the organization, Jacob affirmed East Indians’ place in the Colony as a development-inducing agricultural force: “Indians look to the land as to a beneficent mother, ready to yield her milk of sustenance to the pressure of a gentle and willing hand...given these conditions, there are no places in the Colony...which the Indian cannot make to blossom as a rose.”<sup>148</sup> In addition, Jacob asserted East Indians racial identity when he shot down the proposition of a creolized Guianese identity:

It has been urged that Indians should merge their sense of separateness into a Guianese consciousness, but we fail to find any sound logic in this contention. The strength of the British Empire lies in its variety of its component racial elements, each working from its own particular angle and making its contribution in the manner suited to the genius of its people.<sup>149</sup>

Responding to the evolving context of the thirties where East Indians’ relative privileges (like an Immigration Agent General) were taken away in favor of assimilating them into the wider creole body, Jacob claimed that the East Indians are an integral part of the wider Empire. In doing so, he made East Indians’ ethnic or racial identity their value. He continued to state that East Indians’ “national consciousness,” did not permit “the surrender of our identity as a distinctive racial group.”<sup>150</sup>

Through stating that East Indians’ cultural identity was fixed or primordial, Jacob and the BGEIA centered their language of citizenship around their contributions to the Empire as East Indians and re-envisioned the responsibility the Empire had to them.

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<sup>148</sup> C. R. Jacob, Achievements and Aims of Indians in *The Indian Opinion* Vol. II No 12 May 1938 in Rambarack, B., *British Guiana East Indian Association. Centenary celebration of the arrival of Indians to British Guiana (1838 - 1938)* (San Juan, Trinidad and Tobago: Chakra Pub. House, 2001).

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

### The middle class cultural community

To address the grievances of the East Indians after the “disturbances,” the Moyne Commission included the BGEIA on their list of witnesses among other East Indian groups, such as the “East Indian Intelligentsia,” and “Mr. Gajraj and others.”<sup>151</sup> By including the BGEIA to speak on the topic of labor, the Commission legitimized the BGEIA’s own belief that they were the “natural leaders” of the community. When asked if they “represent the whole of the Indian community” Jacob responded that “all Indians are member of it and we claim to represent the whole Indian community.” After, a back and forth ensued between the Commission and Jacob over the meaning of “the whole Indian community”:

Q. Do you mean all members of it are Indians?

A. No, all the members of the race are members of the Association. They are membering [*sic*] according to our rules but we have financial members who have a voice in the administration of its affairs.

Q. Do the views you have set forward in this memorandum, that you have been good enough to let us have, represent the views of the whole Indian community?

A. We would say 95 percent...This Association has been in existence for 20 years and it has the confidence of 95 percent of the community, Christians, Hindoos, Muslims and we are so composed.<sup>152</sup>

By affirming that they represent the totality of East Indians voices, the BGEIA displayed their paternalistic attitude toward the East Indian estate residents and plantation laborers. By the 1938, there were approximately 130,000 East Indians living in British Guiana, but only 500 of which were financially contributing members of the BGEIA. By claiming to be the voice for all East Indians as non-

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<sup>151</sup> CO950/673

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.



elected representatives, the BGEIA implied that the rest of the East Indian population was incapable of speaking for themselves.

The discrepancy between the goals of the BGEIA and those they claimed to represent manifested itself in the exhaustive list of demands the BGEIA presents to the Moyne Commission, where demands for cultural rights obscured wages and working conditions. It is evident that the BGEIA attempted to achieve two of their goals in their list of demands: first, they aimed to separate themselves from creole universalism by orienting themselves toward their Indian heritage. Second, they aimed to consolidate a monolithic image of East Indians in the eyes of the colonial power. In order to instill change through the Moyne Commission, the BGEIA claimed that East Indians were disenfranchised by colonial policy. In their testimony, the BGEIA essentially claimed that the government discriminated against East Indians by denying them privileges and representation. In order to support these claims, the BGEIA created an image of how special representation, education, and marriage were specifically East Indian concerns, rather than those of the wider colony. By making political representation an issue of finding an official sensitive to Indian demeanor, education a matter of Indian language instruction, and marriage a question of religious recognition, the BGEIA created an alternative vision of East Indian life in the colony. The BGEIA gave up East Indians' claims to political participation in the imperial body in order to foster a greater sense of control over East Indian life in the colony.

The first realm in which the BGEIA described their vision for East Indian citizenship was the civic realm. The BGEIA envisioned East Indian culture playing an active role in communal public life, as shown through their policies for education. Schools served as a contestable arena in which the BGEIA could advance East Indians and promote East Indian culture. In their testimony to the Moyne Commission, the BGEIA described illiteracy as the “foundation of trouble” on the sugar

estate.<sup>153</sup> The BGEIA viewed illiteracy as the main reason that the sugar workers could not articulate their grievances in a civilized, non-truculent manner. Thus, one of the BGEIA's major concerns was the facilitation of adequate education for the East Indian community. However, their educational demands also included a revision of the curriculum, increase in the number of East Indian teachers, and enforcement of student attendance. The BGEIA attributed the poor condition of education on the sugar estates to policies from the indenture period that did not prioritize East Indians' welfare: "it was to the advantage of the Sugar Estates to bring the most illiterate people into the country."<sup>154</sup>

In addition to ethnic discrimination, the BGEIA claimed that the new system of "dual [controlled]" education between the State and the Church furthered East Indians' resistance to enroll in schools.<sup>155</sup> In rural areas, the Presbyterian Canadian Missionary dominated provision of education. As of 1936, out of 236 primary schools, five were run by the government and 231 were Church-run.<sup>156</sup> The BGEIA described the church-run schools as pushing conversion, where school teachers "[tended] to draw young children away from the faith of their fathers."<sup>157</sup> The BGEIA justified the lack of children's attendance as "natural," since parents did not want to see their children converted. This testimony painted a picture of a Christian-centric and creole public sphere. The BGEIA gave another example of the enforcement of this Christian-creole culture in the denial of grant applications for East Indian run schools. The grants, amounting to \$1,912 per annum, were supposed to be dispersed amongst 42 schools (50 cents per student). According a Mr. Kawall's testimony in the BGEIA Moyne Commission hearings, there were multiple applications for educational grants. The denial of the grants signaled to the BGEIA that the colonial government continually marginalized East Indian culture. In order to address the marginalization, the BGEIA proposed both the

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

inclusion of East Indians in the educational system and the promotion of East Indian languages as part of the national education system.

As a space of civic instruction, schools were a place that the BGEIA wanted to infiltrate from the top-down, through increasing the number of East Indian teachers. By 1936, there were a total of 67 East Indians teachers, around 7% of the total number of primary school teachers.<sup>158</sup> The association claimed that the educational system was a cyclical trap where without East Indian teachers, East Indian students would not attend school, which was the only path for them to become teachers themselves. Thus, they demanded a racial quota for teachers in primary schools. The BGEIA brought a Mr. Beramsingh, an East Indian teacher, to the Moyne Commission to speak to the struggles in the educational system. Beramsingh outlined the tough examinations that include denominational testing. He claimed while 30 Indians passed the test, most were not employed as a direct result of the denominational test.<sup>159</sup> Those who are not “debarred” from the Christian schools, did not rise to the rank of head-teacher, “even among the rank and file the tendency is for the promotion to be given on the considerations other than the teaching efficiency of the teacher.”<sup>160</sup> Beramsingh further claimed that promotions were made on grounds such as giving “good service in Sunday schools and the Church.” Even for teachers, “[there was] every inducement for the teacher to look to a change [of] religion for his advancement.”<sup>161</sup> The BGEIA, in projecting the image of the educational system as racist against East Indians, diagnosed it as an issue of discrimination. However, considering the BGEIA’s goals, education was the main way to control the dissemination of cultural values and the way that East Indians thought of themselves as subjects.

In addition to advancing East Indians in the public realm, the BGEIA aimed to transform

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

the public realm's very nature. The central pillar of the BGEIA's demands was the expansion of the primary school curriculum to include cultural education focused on East Indian heritage. Through supporting secular and state-sponsored education, the BGEIA was able to create the image of dividing the public sphere, while also proposing a provision on cultural education that would increase East Indian cultural consciousness. Denominational schooling was seen as "retarding the educational progress of the children [and] as exercising a demoralizing effect to their character and lowering their moral tone," however only creole-Christians are referenced.<sup>162</sup> The BGEIA demanded for East Indian denominational instruction after the regular school hours. This meant the support for "Indian language, literature and history to be extended to all schools where Indian children are present."<sup>163</sup> The proposed vernacular education was to be taught by a "special appointed teacher," which further distinguished the uniqueness of the East Indian against the idea of the universality of creole culture. The BGEIA promoted this policy so that East Indians could appear to be more civilized relative to their creole counterparts. Increasing education for only East Indians also would have had the effect of increasing the number of East Indian urban professionals and individuals eligible to vote. Through promoting cultural education, the BGEIA defined the boundaries of who would be included in their efforts to uplift the working-class. Being East Indian was more than physical attributes or place of origin, but the maintenance of cultural and linguistic attributes that distinguished "East Indian" from "creole."

However, the BGEIA's intentions for their educational demands become clearer when considered alongside their petition for attendance enforcement. The BGEIA placed blame on environmental or systemic conditions for the status of the East Indian community, but more often referred to East Indians' cultural attributes. For instance, there were 9,800 boys and 9,600 girls aged 5-10, but

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

only 6,483 and 4,609 children respectively were recorded as enrolled in school.<sup>164</sup> The majority of un-enrolled children were part of “creole gangs,” groups that worked on the sugar plantations to supplement wages for their families.<sup>165</sup> The BGEIA was particularly concerned with the number of girls enrolled in schools and noted that “the falling away of girls [was] heavier during the last two years of the compulsory period.”<sup>166</sup> The exclusion of girls from the primary school system is an example of how cultural practices manifested themselves in the civic realm. The historical dearth of women in the colony compounded the belief that the women’s role was in the home, since they were necessary for the continuance of the community. However, the BGEIA went against this by supporting the enforcement of the Compulsory Education Ordinance and the addition of three East Indian “attendance officers,” so that every child under the age of 14 would be in school. This demonstrated how the BGEIA was not upholding all traditions, but only those that advanced the image of East Indians. In a colonial framework, by including women in the public sphere, East Indians took a step forward in forming the East Indians as a modern, civilized community. In all, while the BGEIA aimed to improve East Indian facilities, their intentions were to improve how East Indians were perceived as a cultural enclave. The BGEIA activated culture in the civic arena in order to claim public space, while also creating the image that they were helping East Indians at large.

The BGEIA sought to control the family unit and marital norms in order to counter the image of East Indians as backward or uncivilized. Historically, the ratio of women to men in the colony was extremely unequal, numbering 35:100 in the indenture period. Under the indentureship period, informal unions or “bamboo marriages” were common, since women wanted to maintain economic and social independence. Marrying “under the bamboo” meant that a union did not have

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<sup>164</sup> CO950/673; Statistics as of 1936.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

legal footing, nor recognition under Hindu or Muslim practices.<sup>167</sup> There was a large backlash by East Indian men against perceived polyamorous informal unions, who resorted to “wife-killing” in order to restore their sense of control and order.<sup>168</sup> In the eyes of the BGEIA, the practice of “bamboo marriages” and “wife-killing” projected the image to the colonial authorities that East Indians were uncivilized and incapable of adopting Western practices because they would give in to their “animal instincts.”<sup>169</sup> Additionally, one of the key issues for the BGEIA with “bamboo marriages” was how it prevented generational economic mobility. Because of colonial inheritance laws, illegitimate children “found themselves on the wayside of having lost everything that they accumulated or helped their parents to accumulate,” according to the BGEIA representative Mr. Kawall.<sup>170</sup> This posed a direct problem for the BGEIA since East Indians could not incorporate themselves into the colonial system. As a result, the status of marriage and women in particular acquired symbolic significance for East Indians; it was treated as proxy for East Indians’ adherence to patriarchal and colonial norms of control. The BGEIA, in their testimony to the Moyne Commission, attempted to clamp down on “bamboo marriages,” lessening the bureaucratic process of marriage registration and also increasing the usage of socially legitimate marriages by making Pandits and Moulvis, the Hindu and Muslim religious leaders respectively, responsible for registering the marriages. In their point of view, legitimizing marriages was a solution to a two-pronged issue: how “bamboo marriages” affected the image of the East Indians as uncivilized, and how “bamboo marriages” caused real material problems with inheritance that prevented East Indians from prospering in the colony.

The BGEIA challenged the marriage laws on the grounds that they discriminated against

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<sup>167</sup> Raymond T. Smith and Chandra Jayawardena, “Marriage and Family Amongst the East Indians in British Guiana,” *Social and Economic Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (December 1959): 369.

<sup>168</sup> For a more detailed account of the history of the violence endured by East Indian women under indenture in the Anglo-Caribbean, see Prabhu P. Mohapatra, “Restoring the Family: Wife Murders and the Making of a Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labour in the British Caribbean Colonies, 1860-1920” *Studies in History* n.s. 11, No 2 (1995): 227-260; and Rhoda Reddock, “Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1815-1917,” *Caribbean Quarterly* Vol 54 No 4 (2008): 41-68.

<sup>169</sup> CO318/448/1.

<sup>170</sup> CO950/673; High degrees of illegitimacy in the thirties: 88 percent of children in Trinidad in the Indian community; statistics not found for Guyana but can be considered comparable.

East Indians by setting up an extremely bureaucratic process that discouraged East Indians from registering their marriages. Mr. Tyson, a representative from the Colonial Government of India testifying during the BGEIA hearing, described the process as beginning with the search for a “certificate of ‘no impediment’ from the Immigration Authorities,” which allowed for marriage in three different ways. Through Civil Marriage before the Magistrate, through a Minister of the Christian religion if they were Christian, where in both cases the Magistrate or the Padre was responsible for informing the Immigration Authorities of the marriage with the penalty of a fine for not informing. The third way was through the “marriage of personal law and religion,” where the Pandit or Moulvi performed the ceremony. However, in the last form, the onus was on the individuals or their families to inform authorities and would result in both a fine and the invalidation of the marriage if they failed to inform the Immigration Authorities.<sup>171</sup> In the proposed changes, Hindu and Muslim marriages would acquire the same status of Christian marriages when the Pandit or Moulvi were made responsible for registering the marriages. This way, through performance of religious ceremony, the Pandit or Moulvi, would automatically ensure the legitimization of marriage culturally and legally, as in the case of Christian marriages. Facilitating recognition of marriage rituals increased the amount of control that the BGEIA and the Colonial Government had over the social structures and personal lives of East Indians.

While the BGEIA looked to India to dictate a model of colonial citizenship, the Colonial Indian government and also non-governmental organizations were primarily concerned with the appearance of East Indians abroad. They attempted to mediate what it meant to have ethnic and racially similar persons living outside the homeland. Thus, the Colonial Government of India was concerned with the status of East Indians in British Guiana as lawful and moral colonial citizens. The Shri Sanatan Dharma Pratinidhi Sabha (SSDPS), a Hindu nationalist organization based in Lahore,

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

sent a letter to Lord Moyne in 1941, that highlighted concerns with the registration of marriages, as proposed by the BGEIA. The rhetoric espoused by this letter echoes themes of control of women and the maintenance of “righteous” societal structures. As a Hindu nationalist organization, their concerns were framed as the bastardization of Hindus in a creole society. The West was seen as laying “more emphasis...on rights than on duties,” and as a result “the Indians unfortunately...have fallen from *the high ideal of looking to their duties*.”<sup>172</sup> In this letter, the family structure was measured through the role of women, which the SSDPS declared to be in the home: “The only higher ideal which can raise the home and the family life to a better and sweeter level is the ideal of marriage” which was “considered a necessity in general and of faithfulness on the part of the wife towards her husband and to be serviceable to others of the family.”<sup>173</sup> The letter chastised women for their participation in public life and for their economic independence, since these were correlated with higher rates of promiscuity—a threat to the stability of the family structure. The solution, according to the SSDPS, was to reinstate East Indian religious culture as the backbone of the East Indian community, since they viewed religion as the only way to “[control] the desires or promptings by moral or higher forces.”<sup>174</sup> The SSDPS viewed women as the only means by which East Indian culture could be re-imposed; the letter discusses women’s responsibility to “the good of the home and society” and her “influence upon home and children,” as if she herself had the duty to carry the East Indian culture forward in time.<sup>175</sup>

In contrast to the BGEIA, the SSDPS was concerned with how the proposed registration of marriages would degrade the significance of the institution. To the SSDPS, the process of registration was the creolization of a religious tradition. Registration “deprived [society of] stimulus for

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<sup>172</sup> CO318/448/1, (*emphasis mine*).

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.



higher and nobler home life which religious customs and rites are capable of giving.”<sup>176</sup> The representative who wrote the letter described the “sanctity of marriage” as reduced to “animal passions only” and “brought to such a low level that trial marriages and temporary alliances even for one day are being freely advocated and adopted and society does in no way feel unhappy over this most undesirable position.”<sup>177</sup> Similar to the BGEIA, the alternative structures that East Indians had developed in the colonial world were undesirable to organizations in Colonial India like the SSDPS because they broke the idea of an ideal East Indian citizen and civilization developing in the Atlantic. The idea of Indians as the premier colonial subject and race appeared impossible when East Indian social organization and family life was seen as in disarray. The marriage ordinance, as proposed by the BGEIA, was a way to adhere to proper practices of the family that—while it contradicted the aims of the Indian SSDPS—generated an aspirational model that accommodated new practices with tradition. While in dialogue with the Colonial Indian Government and other institutions, the BGEIA began to build a new archetype for East Indians.

The cultural claims in the civic and domestic realms culminated in a new political grouping. The BGEIA depicted East Indians as a minority group within British Guiana that required sufficient legal protection. Thus, they demanded a form of special representation: an Agent General that was a revival of an older post from indentureship era: the IAG, whose job was to ensure East Indians had “efficient protection.”<sup>178</sup> The IAG functioned as a special envoy to translate and advocate the needs of the East Indian laborers because the East Indian population was thought of as a foreign minority. The post was dissolved in 1932 by the Colonial Government with the presumption that East Indians were creolized. However, the dissolution occurred, according to the BGEIA, without “rising the

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Government of India to the Secretary of State for India, no. 15, 3 May 1877, I.E.P. September 1879, File 17 as quoted in Basdeo Mangru, “James Crosby: Hero, Protector, Friend of Indian in Guyana,” *Indo-Caribbean Review* Vol. 1 No. 1 (1994).

status of the laborer,”<sup>179</sup> meaning that, there was no change for the sugar estate laborers. In terms of wages, this claim was true: 42.3 percent of the population, 44 percent of wage earners, the East Indians were overrepresented in the agricultural sector (75 percent of all agricultural wage earners).<sup>180</sup> Although the majority in the industry, they made \$98 per year while the average wage in the sugar industry for all laborers was \$112.<sup>181</sup> Moreover, between 1931 and 1935 the East Indian wage rate declined while that of the average wage earner increased.<sup>182</sup> Without the IAG to advocate on their behalf, East Indians were unrepresented, according to the BGEIA. In politics, only 428 of 5,000 total voters were East Indian. Based on population break down, this was an extreme.<sup>183</sup> The BGEIA attributed the lack of changes to the “evils” of the indenture system. Thus, in their view, similar systems needed to be revised. Mr. Kawall of the BGEIA claimed that the absence of settled wage rates set off the disturbances—wages were given out at the end of each week in the amount that the planter deemed adequate, without regulation or oversight. He argued that the disturbances would not have occurred if the East Indians had the proper representation of someone sensitive to their demands. In contrast to furthering their peripheral status in the colony, the BGEIA’s demand for an interim special representative also gave East Indians access to centers of power, while raising their image as a civilized mass in the long-term.

The BGEIA wanted the East Indian community to maintain their unfiltered proximity to the colonial government. With extreme franchise constraints and with limitations on the provision of education, the BGEIA saw the IAG as the only avenue for the East Indians to maintain their collective bargaining power. This was a vision from within the colonial structure because it cemented East Indian subservience and reduced political self-expression. The BGEIA pitched this to Commission

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<sup>179</sup> CO950/673

<sup>180</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean*, 339.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 339-340.

<sup>183</sup> Seecharan, *Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity*, 219.

as a way to build co-operation between employers and employees. The economic appeal presented in the Moyne Commission, however, differed from the cultural appeal presented in the BGEIA's journal, the *Indian Opinion*. To East Indians, the BGEIA pitched the Agent General as a cultural mediator. The position was to be filled by a man, appointed by the Colonial Government of India, who would be "more amenable to the Indian disposition."<sup>184</sup> The article stated that the Agent General should be modelled after those in South Africa, Malaya and Ceylon. Additionally, the BGEIA described the ideal Agent General as "a man of culture and refinement, of education and learning." Here, the Agent General represented what the BGEIA envisioned as an end goal for modern East Indians in terms of colonial engagement: the ability to navigate between European and East Indian ways of being. While the Agent General was sympathetic to East Indians, he would be superior to them. The relationship between India and British Guiana was hierarchical, and so the presence of the Agent General facilitated the BGEIA's model of interlocuter or mediator based representative outside participatory politics.

The BGEIA filled the role of the mediator as well. While the BGEIA took up the cause of the Indian laborer's representation on self-acclaimed noble grounds, the language utilized to justify the special representation of the East Indians was founded on assumptions of East Indian cultural retardation. The BGEIA noted that a "large percentage of the present laboring class is locally born," and they describe the outlook of this generation of laborers as "wider" and "more modern."<sup>185</sup> Despite this, they continued to push for demands that would hold the East Indians in a paternalistic condition. For instance, during the Moyne Commission inquiry, Mr. Kawall stated that "both sides want to be controlled," before being quickly corrected by his peer: "I think he means that at the present time the old laborer finds it very difficult to be understood."<sup>186</sup> In the BGEIA's perspective,

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> CO950/673

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

rural East Indians were not ready for political consciousness. The BGEIA was afraid of East Indians breaking their cultural coalition before it was fully entrenched, (hence the need for an interim mediator). This disconnect would ultimately lead their organization to become more concerned with challenges to their hegemony in middle-class discourse, at the expense of their standing with working class strikers.

### **Other organizational support for the middle-class vision**

While the BGEIA claimed to be the sole voice of all East Indians, other religious and civil organizations in British Guiana, which did not have the ultimate aim of consolidating the East Indians into a monolithic political group, co-opted the BGEIA's goals to their own ends. Religious organizations, like the Islamic Association and the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS), were the most vocal in their claim to represent their respective religious groups. Their demands' complemented those of the BGEIA, and only broke from the BGEIA when when they tweaked the BGEIA's demands to adhere to a religious expression more. For instance, the Islamic Association called for the inclusion of Urdu or Arabic in the educational curriculum, the upkeep of Muslim schools, divorce recognition in accordance with Muslim law, and the appointment of a Qazi (learned Muslim religious judge) by the Government of India to carry out religious marriages for the Muslim Indians across Trinidad, Surinam, and British Guiana.<sup>187</sup> In these demands, the Islamic Association expressed similar concerns about creolization as the BGEIA. Their language was more radical at times:

West Indian civilization [is] detrimental to ours, which circumstances if allowed to continue unchecked, will ultimately result in our losing our religion, our nationality, in fact our very identity, we feel with confident justification, that the onus of rendering every possible

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<sup>187</sup> CO950/661

assistance and opportunity to preserve our religious, national and social rights and customs, lies equally on the shoulders of the two Governments.<sup>188</sup>

The Islamic Association was similarly concerned with a decline in East Indians' status, however their motive was not explicitly political, as with the BGEIA. The language they employ is more religious and concerned with East Indians' responsibility to a higher force. Similarly, the SDMS claimed to represent the 95,000 Hindus in the colony. They also supported most of the measures the BGEIA proposed to the Moyne Commission, reiterating them in their own memorandum.<sup>189</sup> However, their rhetoric referred to religion to a larger degree. These religious organizations did not contest the BGEIA for representation of the East Indian community because their goals would have been achieved through the BGEIA's work. These organizations were not focused on spreading the religion across the colony but rather connecting individuals from across the colony; they functioned to keep East Indians within their own cultural enclave. Thus, these organizations had little reason to contest the power of the BGEIA in claiming representation.

Nevertheless, the East Indian Intelligentsia (EII), a group of East Indians who "[claimed] to be the leaders of thought and public opinion within [their] community," contested the position of the BGEIA.<sup>190</sup> While they agreed with the BGEIA that the status of East Indians had diminished, their solutions to uplift the race were more focused on developing cultural consciousness, however from a more radicalized angle. They "[viewed] with grave alarm and anxiety, that, cut off from India for want of direct communication, East Indians of the younger generation, are fast losing their best national traits and characteristics, and are adopting the not very best customs of West Indians cum Americanism, which disintegrate their morals and manners."<sup>191</sup> The EII viewed the creolization of

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> CO950/712

<sup>190</sup> CO950/676

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

younger East Indians as negative since it would take away from their East Indian traits. Their views, more explicitly racist than the BGEIA, expressed fears of cultural miscegenation: “in the hybrid customs...we see the complete smashing of the best moral and social gifts that India has given us.”<sup>192</sup> Through this rhetoric, it is clear that the EII not only aimed for a culturally distinct East Indian community, but a closed community. They “[dreaded] to think of the not distant possibility when East Indian girls and boys will mate themselves with boys and girls of the Negro and other races without fear of social consequences.”<sup>193</sup> For the EII, the preservation of authentic East Indian culture went beyond the political gains. Their rhetoric, more radical than the BGEIA, brought back the idea of Indian colonization of British Guiana to save the colony. The EII stated that “infusion of new blood from the Mother India” would “tone up the lives of the entire East Indian community and give a swing back to originality.”<sup>194</sup> Both the EII and the BGEIA looked toward India as their model of what modern colonial citizenship entailed. And both viewed East Indians' social and political life as determined by the ethnic community. However, it was only the BGEIA that left a lasting impact on how East Indians conceptualized themselves and their societal positioning. The EII's claims went unanswered by the Moyne Commission since they aimed to uproot the colonial system. The BGEIA, conversely, was able to gain the ear of the Commission through acceptance of the status quo system.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the BGEIA capitalized on the strikes to forward their own program to the colonial government. While this program included provisions for wage increases, it was obscured amongst other provisions for the political and cultural advancement of East Indians. This

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

was inherently problematic since the BGEIA claimed to represent the voice of the East Indians at large when, in fact, the BGEIA's articulation of political consciousness clashed with the estate workers' visions. While the estate workers' vision focused on creating space to develop aspects of their personhood out of their identity as laborers, the middle-class vision focused on creating a homogeneous identity or polity that appropriated the estate workers' struggles. The organization's means was by activating culture as a lens in the three dimensions—civic, domestic and political—oriented toward an Indian heritage.

This model used cultural aspects to transform unacknowledged East Indian traditions to the basis for a shared identity. The cultural flexibility that existed in the previous decades was replaced by rigid rhetoric that labelled East Indian as either authentic or creolized. Through juxtaposing East Indian culture with creole culture, the BGEIA recast East Indians as “others” in the colony, which formed the basis for their demand for special legal provisions. While the BGEIA failed to secure many of their actual demands, they helped to secure East Indians' position as a socio-economic collective in the eyes of the colonial government. In the model of cultural autonomy taken by the BGEIA, East Indians were not assimilated or integrated fully into the colonial enterprise, which rendered them unequal in the colonial structures based on racialized characteristics. In doing so, they cemented East Indians' position on the margins of the colonial enterprise, despite being the single largest ethnic group.

### Chapter 3: Refashioning the Empire

#### Introduction

The riots sparked by the Depression continued well into the late thirties. During this decade, the political and economic landscape shifted: colonial authorities no longer considered East Indians “immigrants.” And so, the Immigration Ordinance no longer protected East Indians, and colonial authorities no longer oversaw the sugar estate system. By 1931, out of 130,540 East Indians, 81.55 percent were born inside the Colony.<sup>195</sup> Colonial authorities considered East Indians as “creole” in the census report and, by extension, in colonial policies; this meant that East Indians were now subject to the same legislation as the Black creole peoples. East Indian laborers were considered to be largely of the same socioeconomic status of the Black industrial laborers, however East Indian workers did not have the resources to form labor unions, and the existing labor union—the BGLU—was virtually ineffective for agricultural workers. The sudden deconstruction of ethnic-divide-and-rule policies left East Indians without a clear place in the imperial societal fabric.

The Colonial Government increasingly distanced itself from overseeing the large sugar estates. The Booker Brothers, McConnell and Company, Ltd. (Booker Bros and McConnell), a London based corporation, controlled 18 out of 28 sugar estates in British Guiana by 1940 and dominated various other sectors of the economy.<sup>196</sup> Because of their economic power, Booker Bros and McConnell exerted substantial political influence on the governments in the colony and metropole. In the metropole, members of the British Parliament had longstanding connections to the sugar industry, and the sugar industry had a powerful lobby.<sup>197</sup> Meanwhile, in the colony, the local colonial

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<sup>195</sup> British Guiana Census Commissioner. *Report on the Results of the Census of the Population, 1931* (British Guiana 1931 Census), G.P., 1932.

<sup>196</sup> Alexander, Robert J., and Eldon M. Parker, *A History of Organized Labor in the English-Speaking West Indies* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2004), 328; Raymond T. Smith, and Affairs Royal Institute of International. *British Guiana* (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); Alexander and Parker, 328-329; other holdings of Booker Bros and McConnell include Booker Stores, Bookers-British Dug House, Bookers Shipping, Bookers Industrial Holdings, Guyana Lithography Co., Caribbean Printers, Lechworth Press Ltd.; Guyana Distilleries, Guyana Stockfeeds, and Guyana Insurance Agencies.

<sup>197</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean*, 137.



government protected the interests of the corporate-planter class in order to bolster the overall wealth and status of the colony. As the large corporations increased their control over the economy, the East Indian laborers became increasingly frustrated with the conditions on the estates—unemployment and underemployment, wage rate freezes, no formal organization, and restricted suffrage—that persisted in spite of a local commission investigation into the plantation system in 1935.<sup>198</sup> The Commission sparked no change; they concluded that any changes to the status of workers would negatively affect the sugar industry, which relegated workers to a voiceless position once again.<sup>199</sup>

The strikes across the sugar estates culminated on Wednesday, 15 of February 1938, when “a large crowd of laborers carrying shovels, cutlasses, and sticks attempted to board the train at Leonora Station without tickets.”<sup>200</sup> A group of approximately 200 East Indian workers struck on Pln. Leonora, and attempted to take the train to see the Moyne Commission and Ayube M. Edun of the Man Power Citizens’ Association (MPCA) in Georgetown in order to present their grievances about the conditions and management on the sugar estates. On the way to Georgetown, the group of “shovel-men, cane-cutters, puntloaders and weeders” met C.R. Jacob of the BGEIA instead, who advised them not to see the Moyne Commission. After Jacob left, the “crowd became more disorderly and again rushed the stelling.”<sup>201</sup>

The “riot” at Pln. Leonora exemplifies the different approaches taken by the BGEIA and the MPCA, the first major union to represent the agricultural sugar estate workers. Despite the fact agricultural work comprised the majority of East Indians’ employment (52,553 out of 129,686) and the majority of agricultural laborers were East Indian (52,553 workers out of a total of 74,603), the

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> CO111/739/1

<sup>200</sup> CO950/749

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

BGEIA did not concern itself with the status of agricultural laborers. The MPCA, however, encouraged activity that would better the conditions of estate workers.<sup>202</sup>

Jeweler, author and journalist Ayube M. Edun, whose grandfather was an indentured laborer on Pln. Philadelphia, and later became a head driver and “popular mediator in disputes” on Orangstein Estate, founded the MPCA in 1937.<sup>203</sup> Throughout the twenties, Edun actively promoted East Indian workers’ rights by joining the BGEIA, publishing articles in journals like the *Labor Advocate* and the *Guiana Review*, and writing a book titled *London’s Heart Probe and Britain’s Destiny*, where he outlined his ideology, Rational Practical Idealism (RPI). Written after Edun visited the metropole, *London’s Heart Probe and Britain’s Destiny* described RPI as a reinvigorated imperial order where all citizens—those in and outside of the metropole—would achieve “transcendental and inviolable” social and economic equality.<sup>204</sup> The MPCA derived its name from RPI, “a scheme devised by its founder for the reorganization of the British Empire.”<sup>205</sup>

The primary objectives of the MPCA were to “represent the cause of its members, and endeavor to obtain their just, equitable, economic, political and social rights from the State and their employers, educate its members to live up to a sense of obligation to the State and to Society as good citizens,” and to “promote and improve the social, moral, intellectual, and economic advancement of those persons who depend directly upon their own exertion by hand or by brain for the means of a livelihood in British Guiana.”<sup>206</sup> While the union operated in a post-1932 climate where colonial policy encouraged East Indians to adopt a creolized identity, the MPCA continued to

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<sup>202</sup> 129, 686 represents the total number of East Indians employed; British Guiana 1931 Census.

<sup>203</sup> Clem Seecharan, *Sweetening "Bitter Sugar": Jock Campbell, the Booker Reformer in British Guiana, 1934-1966* (Kingston; Miami: Ian Randle Publishers, 2005): 72.

<sup>204</sup> Ayube M. Edun, *London’s Heart Probe and Britain’s Destiny* (A.H. Stockwell, 1935), 201.

<sup>205</sup> Smith, 166 as quoted in Ernst Halperin, "Racism and Communism in British Guiana." *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 7, no. 1 (1965): 36; “... ‘In this new state there would be a number of divisions to which persons would be allotted on the basis of ‘accurate scientific statistics’. These would be the ‘Supreme Council of Intelligentsia-Intelligentsia-Transitional Intelligentsia-Manpower Citizens (manpower of Brain and Hands)-Women-Citizens--Children of the RIP State-Disabled Citizens of Mental, Physical, Social Disabilities-Retired Citizens, and Essential Division of Functions’. As a start toward the inauguration of the British Renaissance, Mr. Edun . . . started the Manpower Citizens Association which had the immediate and less ambitious object of bettering the conditions of work on sugar estates.”

<sup>206</sup> CO950/675

invoke culture to reaffirm East Indians' positions as both imperial and diasporic subjects. While Nigel Bolland argues that labor organizations were inherently weak because they reflected the ethnic segmentation of the population, he assumes that the strongest form of class consciousness should be de-racialized and solely based on economic status. He ignores how the MPCA acted as more than a labor union, and how culture contributed to a heightened sense of political consciousness among workers.<sup>207</sup>

I argue that the MPCA fundamentally challenged the relationship between the imperial center and colonial society by promoting East Indian laborers as imperial-national subjects. Imperial policy during this period shifted to a "national" conception of the British Empire.<sup>208</sup> The MPCA adopted this discourse, and re-fashioned East Indian culture and laborers from a fixed peripheral position to the center of a new political vision. In this view, East Indians in British Guiana had "broader civilization, international and extraterritorial affiliations" that complemented their central position in the Empire.<sup>209</sup> Because the union attributed East Indians' previous degradation to the wider colonial-capitalist complex, and not to British rule itself, they aspired for East Indians to occupy a central role in British Guiana within the Empire. Therefore, Edun and the MPCA's political vision proposed shifts in the imperial system along the lines of RPI that reaffirmed East Indians' position in the colony as the central agricultural working class, saw East Indians as integral to the functioning of the Empire, and fostered their sense of belonging in British Guiana. The MPCA's vision, which proposed new possibilities for East Indians in the colony, was a diasporic vision of community, politics, and culture.

Claims to a separate social sphere found no place in the MPCA's political vision since colonial authorities began to conjoin the political and social spheres to form a singular imperial

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<sup>207</sup> Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean*, 340.

<sup>208</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, "Premonitions of the Past," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 4 (Nov 2015): 825.

<sup>209</sup> Sinha, "Premonitions of the Past," 823.

community. However, soon after the union's inception, the colonial authorities treated the residents of British Guiana as single creolized body. Colonial authorities began to subsume East Indians under a "creolized" political body and narrowed the possibilities for East Indians' centrality. The new regionalization of the creole community posed a problem for Edun and the MPCA since within this scope, their hopes of East Indian dominance in the Empire were once again marginalized.

This chapter will explore the continuities and changes of East Indian political vision prompted by the changes in colonial policy and the ideology of the MPCA, specifically inspecting how the advent of the rhetorical singular community of belonging fragmented earlier East Indian anti-colonial visions. First, this chapter will discuss how the MPCA emerged to represent the East Indian laborers, and how their political vision aligned ideas of a singular imperial community: the union sought to refashion the Empire to bolster the position of the working class. Then, the chapter will move to discuss the role of culture in the MPCA's vision. It will consider the ways that the MPCA's evocation of East Indian culture re-affirmed their permanence and centrality in the colony. Finally, this chapter will move to discuss the change in colony policies through the thirties when colonial authorities stopped viewing East Indian as labor-capital or immigrants. These policies emphasized incorporating East Indians into existing structures of governance, eliminating cultural difference, and promoting a singular definition of imperial modernity.

### **Representing the East Indian agricultural worker**

The BGEIA, the most visible political society representing East Indians, was absent from the on-the-grounds strike action throughout the 1930s. However, the 1935 Commission on Labor Disputes called the BGEIA in to settle the facts of what happened and represent the East Indian sugar estate workers. The 1935 Commission called Jacob in his capacity as the Vice President of the BGEIA, "to give [the Commission] the benefit of [his] ideas and assistance," "owing to his standing

in the East Indian community,” to which Jacob responded that he could not help them.<sup>210</sup> Because these leaders rose through the political ranks, not the ranks of the laborers on the estates, as described by Sara Abraham, they had no influence in their respective communities, despite being approved by the Colonial Government.<sup>211</sup> In this period of transition to ethnicity-free governance, the conference reflected a return to a model of political representation through ethnic communities. The BGEIA claimed that because of their position as interlocuters they were the only people who could understand the East Indian masses and bring them along in their civilizing mission.<sup>212</sup> However, the relationship between the BGEIA and the broader East Indian community was virtually non-existent, because the organization did not have a direct relationship to the workers they claimed to represent.

The MPCA emerged to fill this vacuum and represent East Indians’ labor interests. The union worked on the ground with East Indian workers through speeches, meetings, and strike action to promote East Indians as workers in the colony. The MPCA General Secretary’s Reports recorded how the executive committee held meetings with workers in every district (except for the Island of Wakenaam), demonstrating how the MPCA changed the middle-class’ relationship toward the East Indian sugar estate workers: the workers were no longer objects needing protection, but active subjects behind the organization’s mission.<sup>213</sup> For instance, when workers struck for six weeks at Pln. Non Pariel, the MPCA “granted strike Relief and Law Costs [of] \$800.00.”<sup>214</sup> While the MPCA was not involved in organizing early strike action, once spontaneous strike action occurred, they did not appropriate it to achieve their own ends (like the BGEIA did) and assisted workers to ensure that the workers’ action was effective and sustainable. The MPCA, inspired by Edun’s ideology of RPI,

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<sup>210</sup> IOR/L/PJ/8/193

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>212</sup> Gyan Prakash, "The Colonial Genealogy of Society: Community and Political Modernity in India," In *The Social in Question: New Bearings*, ed. Patrick Joyce (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2002), 83.

<sup>213</sup> "General Secretary’s First Report” in Man-power Citizens’ Association, *Foundation Souvenir, 1936-1939* (Demerara: Blanche A. Hazel, 1939).

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

aimed for the working class to have “equal recognition, equal honor, and equality of status...in every phase of the nation's life.”<sup>215</sup> Also unlike the BGEIA, which saw East Indians as primordial peoples and an unchanging mass, the MPCA saw the potential for East Indian laborers to improve their condition as a working class through inclusion in the imperial system rather than by demanding its overhaul. The union declared that workers should “demonstrate—nay: remonstrate and having shown your worth as the backbone of the land, you can also show you are entitled to have a definite share in its management and administration.”<sup>216</sup> The MPCA proposed a reformed idea of workers’ role in the colony: workers as the center of colonial life should have a greater share in its governance. The proposed model of citizenship revolved around participation, active voice and control over one’s own production.

The MPCA saw active participation in the political sphere as the only way to secure worker’s rights in the long-term. The basis of the MPCA’s ideology was the exercise of worker autonomy through electing labor representatives to advocate on their behalf and secure their interests. The lack of representation in the Legislature concerned the MPCA; they questioned “How can any Trade Union maintain its representation unless it has the power to enforce it in the Legislature?”<sup>217</sup> Thus, the MPCA proposed constitutional reform: adult suffrage, elected majority in the legislature, no financial qualifications for representatives, and representatives to be paid by the State. They claimed that these reforms were the workers’ “life’s blood,” since legislative representation was the only avenue by which workers had the power to enforce their demands over a long period of time.<sup>218</sup> The elected majority in the legislature for labor and workers was aligned with the re-ordering of the imperial state toward the producers of wealth. It re-affirmed workers’ position as subject-citizens and

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<sup>215</sup> Edun, *London’s Heart Probe and Britain’s Destiny*, 119.

<sup>216</sup> “Demonstration Day, President’s Address, 6 February 1939” in Man-power Citizens’ Association, *Foundation Souvenir, 1936-1939* (Demerara: Blanche A. Hazel, 1939).

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> CO950/675.

matched their numerical majority in society itself. The MPCA claimed that representation stood in contrast to the BGEIA's methods, where workers depended "on the charity of the State or the Bourgeois Representatives to plead their grievances."<sup>219</sup> The MPCA criticized the BGEIA's approach, stating that "workers expecting their employers, or some charitable disposed middle-class representations...to champion their rights—not unlike the attitude adopted by Mr. C.R. Jacob—often find instead, that they are maligned and abused."<sup>220</sup> Instead, the MPCA claimed that they gave workers the right to self-advocate, and presented them as imperial subject-citizens worthy of the same rights afforded those in the metropole.

In this new period of colonial de-racialization of governance, the MPCA demanded that East Indian workers, on an individual level, be granted the same claims to societal rights and participation as others because they were a modern working class. They forfeited their claims to the social sphere based on cultural difference, challenged the depictions of East Indians as socially dysfunctional, and located East Indians within a racialized socio-economic system. For instance, during their testimony to the West Indies Royal Commission, the MPCA called into question an "objective scientific" study by a Dr. Giglioli which claimed that an East Indian family could survive on \$2.15 a week because of how their only needs were "food, shelter, bright and attractive clothing, a little spare money for rum and gambling and opportunities for easy love making."<sup>221</sup> The report, commissioned by the Colonial Government in 1933, was an investigation into the nutritional deficiency in the East Indian community of British Guiana. However, Mr. Giglioli's report institutionalized racialized assumptions about East Indians as socio-economic policy. Mr. Giglioli's report demonstrates how the Colonial Government was complicit in developing policies that kept East Indians as a working class, even when they claimed to distance themselves from regulating the socio-economic system. The report allowed

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Leading article of the *Guiana Review* of Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> November 1938, CO950/675

<sup>221</sup> CO950/675.

colonial authorities and the planter-class to further justify limiting East Indians' political rights since it painted East Indians as only concerned with survival and frivolities. The MPCA disputed the report because they saw the racialized assumptions at the base of the report as an attack on East Indians and their culture. Thus, the MPCA called Mr. Giglioli a "fiend" in an *Guiana Review* article and his report "nothing short of systemically killing out a race as a whole," because the report's conclusions would have "deliberately [reduced] the physique of workers."<sup>222</sup> Their argument was that East Indians income should not only be based on what amount of money should allow for "an adequate amount of calorific value," but allow East Indians to enhance their socio-economic place.

The union saw the East Indian agricultural workers' socio-economic place as consequence of the colonial-capitalist complex that denied East Indians access to the broader social sphere of civic life in order to keep them as a laboring class. Edun found that the "non-producers and non-essentials [had] usurped the fundamental right of producers and essentials," which "made an aggravation and a setback in the equilibrium of society."<sup>223</sup> In their memorandum to the Moyne Commission, the MPCA stated that "[East Indian] workers brought their religious and their social counterparts on the plantations and these coming into contact with a slave-driving system of economics prevailing therein formed a heterogenous combination of very plastic material for exploitation," implying that the colonial-capitalist system took advantage of East Indians' racialized tendencies. This confirmed the presence of East Indian social hierarchies that facilitated the types of labor domination that occurred on the plantations after abolition. Specifically, the MPCA viewed the Colonial Government as culpable for allowing the Sugar Planters' Association (SPA) and the metropolitan interests to take advantage of colonial systems of governance to supply their labor. In an article from the *Guiana Review*, Edun addressed how East Indians went through a "gradual process of neglect," in which they

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Edun, *London's Heart Probe and Britain's Destiny*, 119.



were “reduced to a kind of economic and mental thralldom.”<sup>224</sup> In this extract, Edun stated that the denial of adequate wages, lack of educational infrastructure, and insufficient representation in the colonial process of indenture and after were the practices that contributed to East Indians’ ongoing oppression. It is notable that the MPCA did not identify colonial rule itself as the cause of East Indian oppression, but rather focused on the practices that resulted from the combination of capitalism with Empire; their vision, although opposed to exploitative practices, did not antagonize the British themselves or the nature of Empire for considering East Indians as labor-capital.

The planter class, represented by the SPA, was the main target of the MPCA’s criticism. The union attributed East Indians’ disenfranchisement to the practices pioneered by “Big Business.” The MPCA criticized “capitalist-landlordism” for “maintaining its supremacy...because of the British public and British Guiana consumer’s generosity in paying a preference to sugar’s interests of 4 ½ million dollars.”<sup>225</sup> The MPCA stated that “capitalist-landlordism” practices occurred because the imperial politico-economic system valorized the final product, metropolitan consumer goods and wealth, over their sources and colonial producers. On one hand, the MPCA critiqued “Big Business” for only acting in the interest of their own profits, but on the other, they critiqued the imperial system for allowing the “Big Business” to dominate the system of government to the extent that the interests of the SPA defined and controlled colonial subjects. The MPCA claimed that “Big Business” “influence [was] felt in matters of tariffs, enactments, and laws...the SPA [was] the real master in British Guiana affairs.”<sup>226</sup> For instance, instead of resorting to the standard practices of negotiation with unions, as practiced in the metropole, the SPA used their power to force union leaders off the sugar estates by claiming that they did not have the right to conduct union business or organize there (a practice known as “persecution and eviction” to the MPCA). This furthered the idea that

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<sup>224</sup> Appendix G: An article in the *Guiana Review* of Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> December 1938 by Ayube M. Edun, CO950/675.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

the colonial workers were not subject-citizens, but labor-capital in the colony since the colonial-capitalist complex did not afford East Indians the same rights, like negotiation, as even working-class citizens in the metropole. The union attributed the manipulation of the colonial system by the planter class to the fundamental lack of labor representation in the legislature; without labor representation, “Big Business” could manipulate the law to benefit itself, like they did when they stalled the Peaceful Picketing Ordinance and refused to recognize the MPCA as a negotiating partner. The MPCA illuminated how the political and economic systems were linked, and how imperial subjecthood depended on one’s place in the racialized socio-economic system.

The MPCA reframed the colonial-capitalist complex as the real obstacle toward achieving East Indian dignity and citizenship.<sup>227</sup> The MPCA described East Indian sugar estate workers as in a condition of “helplessness,” since “a combination of forces against which they can never hope to succeed” surrounded them.<sup>228</sup> In a *Guiana Review* article, the MPCA targeted the British-held monopolies in the colony, stating that their firms “[cut] against the best principles of British Democracy,” since they “[usurped] Charter Rights...to dominate the entire country for the benefit of His Finance and its gods.”<sup>229</sup> In other words, “Big Business” kept wages low because it reduced their costs, which kept East Indians out of the legislature—since earnings determined franchise eligibility—ensuring that East Indians did not have the power enact change.<sup>230</sup> The MPCA also pinpointed the SPA as the driving force behind policies that prevented East Indians from participating in the institutions necessary to improve their socio-economic position. The union paid particular attention to education, since they believed that illiteracy was the “chief obstacle against Trade Unionism,” since employers “[maintained] that education enlightens the workers and the less they are educated the better they

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<sup>227</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>228</sup> “General Secretary’s First Report” in Man-power Citizens’ Association, *Foundation Souvenir, 1936-1939* (Demerara: Blanche A. Hazel, 1939).

<sup>229</sup> Appendix A: Leading article of the *Guiana review* of Sunday 12 November 1938; 20 November 1938; CO111/747/5, Appendix B: Leading article of the *Guiana Review* Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> September 1938, CO111/747/5.

<sup>230</sup> CO905/675.

could be controlled.”<sup>231</sup> While not specific, they implied that practices in British Guiana constructed East Indians’ identities as laborers in a way that maintained “the essential ingredients of human backwardness,” or a condition of exploitation on the estates.<sup>232</sup> For the MPCA, this meant that if East Indians were still held in a position of oppressed estate labor, then there could be no political future for them since the colonial state associated the “East Indian” identity with an underdeveloped citizen (or “immigrant”) and since the economic structures of the estate hindered the development of their political subjecthood.

### **The new imperial order**

Applying Prakash’s notion of civil society and colonial genealogy in India to the Caribbean context, the MPCA’s vision was “blind to the deep contradiction entailed in forming a civil society with a civilizing mission, in using colonial despotism to establish society as the domain of liberty and free subjects.”<sup>233</sup> In other words, the MPCA molded their form of organization in the model of the Empire, which was a “project destined to always remain incomplete,” since the organization had fundamentally imperial aims, while simultaneously challenging the framing and boundaries of imperial citizenship.<sup>234</sup> Born into the colonial system, the members of the MPCA’s executive committee stated that they “feel fundamentally British, think British, and are Britishers to the core,” and that in British Guiana “the feeling for Britain and things British stands paramount in the minds of the Colonial-born,” emphasizing their attachment to the imperial polity as their organizing framework and political allegiance.<sup>235</sup> Colonial residents, in particular, East Indians in British Guiana at this

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Prakash, “The Colonial Genealogy of Society: Community and Political Modernity in India,” 84.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Edun, *London’s Heart Probe and Britain’s Destiny*, 2.

moment, were by and large born inside the colony, thus their subject-position was entirely constructed by the Empire.

Edun thought that the “geographical growth of the British Empire [had] out-grown the political constitution of the United Kingdom.” In other words, the Empire’s political structure—the metropole-colony relationship—was obsolete.<sup>236</sup> Writing in the context of rising anti-colonial movement, like Gandhism in British India and increased militancy in the Egyptian Protectorate, and the new “Protection for Great Britain” policy that imposed tariffs on goods coming into Britain from the colonies, Edun proposed a re-ordering of imperial society that eliminated the separatist policies between the metropole and the colonies. Edun re-imagined the imperial polity as a singular inter-dependent entity, and re-structured it to “rest on its producing units—those that add to the wealth of the nation... The man who takes a piece of metal or a pound of cotton or wool, and makes a utility, has enhanced the purchasing power of the State.”<sup>237</sup> In this vision, the Dominions (the producers) did not have separate Constitutions and status in the polity.<sup>238</sup> The agricultural colonial working class became one and the same with the working class in the metropole itself. The only difference between the two was in their racialized specialties: Edun called this “racial homogeneity,” however what is described is geographic and racial separation, in which the imperial center valued each group for their different but equal contribution to a common polity. Edun said that the “best minds of Old England with the virile, young, and robust manhood of the various units, commingled with the best cultural traits from India, Egypt, and others—the world might have seen the dawn of a new era in this Comity of Nations.”<sup>239</sup> In this vision, the Empire valorized difference in a non-hierarchical

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 117-18.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 88.

fashion. Additionally, the Empire became the primary community of political, economic, and social belonging.

The MPCA worked with members of the colonial establishment, like the British Trade Union Congress (TUC), the central decision-making body for unions in the metropole, to help further the workers' cause and promote solidarity with workers inside the Empire. For example, in a letter from the MPCA to the British Labor Party, the MPCA appealed to the Party for financial assistance, "knowing fully its sympathy for Colonial workers and their movement toward concerted action" and since the Party "[stood] at the center around which every Colonial Movement [found] inspiration and help."<sup>240</sup> In other words, they saw the metropolitan labor model as the pathway for workers in the colony to achieve the same success; it also implied that the unions in the colony equated the working class struggles. In particular, Arthur Creech-Jones, the founder of the TUC, the advocacy body for all trade unions in Great Britain, and Walter Citrine, the Labor representative on the Moyne Commission, were heavily involved with the development of trade unions in the Caribbean from 1926.<sup>241</sup> Sahadeo Basdeo recounts how the West Indian trade unionists relied on the TUC's guidance, especially its Fabian members, to organize themselves. Citrine met with the MPCA on 7 February 1939 where he "discussed with [the MPCA] on questions of organization and management of Unions and certain other matters and gave [them] good advice."<sup>242</sup> In working with the metropolitan organizations, the MPCA saw themselves as instruments of modernity that would reform British Guiana and British Guianese subjects into imperial working class subjects. The MPCA followed the example of the British labor unions, who organized the English working class during mid-19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> "General Secretary's First Report" in Man-power Citizens' Association, *Foundation Souvenir, 1936-1939* (Demerara: Blanche A. Hazel, 1939).

<sup>241</sup> Sahadeo Basdeo, "Walter Citrine and the British Caribbean Workers Movement During the Commission Hearing 1938-9," *The Journal of Caribbean History* 18, no. 2 (1983): 45.

<sup>242</sup> "General Secretary's First Report" in Man-power Citizens' Association, *Foundation Souvenir, 1936-1939* (Demerara: Blanche A. Hazel, 1939).

century. During the MPCA's Moyne Commission hearing, Walter Citrine (also of the TUC) encouraged actions on the sugar estates:

Q. Let us get back, if we can, to this point about the reasons for non-recognition. You know that in England recognition of trade unions has come very often after embittered conflict? You heard me say the other day perhaps that the railway strike of 1911 brought with it recognition? Up to that time the unions had not been recognized by the employers and that has been true of many industries, so really you are in a somewhat similar position now, are you not?

A. Yes.

Q. The only alternative left to you as an Association if the employers will not recognize you, is to make as much trouble for them as you can, as an association, until they do, is it not?

A. That is so.

Q. Is that not what the trade unions in England, as far as you know, have done?

A. Yes.

Q. So when you hear British trade unions held up as a model, you remember that part too?

A. Yes.<sup>243</sup>

In this excerpt, Walter Citrine recognized that the MPCA was following the same path of agitation that the British unions took in order to gain recognition. He also acknowledged the importance of strikes and militant action to secure government recognition. While on one hand, the MPCA gained greater legitimacy by adopting an imperial form, on the other, its imperial form subordinated the union to specific constraints on who and what they could advocate for. They “identified their political

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<sup>243</sup> CO950/675.

and ethical horizons with the contours of the larger imperial polity,” similar to the process that some early nationalists in Colonial India underwent, as described by Mrinalini Sinha.<sup>244</sup>

Similar to the unions in the metropole, the MPCA not only took aim at the economic exploiting class, but also at the complacency of the colonial government in this exploitation and failure to protect imperial subject-citizens. In the imperial state, where “it [was] the duty of the State to provide the means for the Citizens to live on a certain standard,” the MPCA viewed the colonial government as having failed to recognize East Indians as citizens after the termination of indenture, since East Indians’ standards of living and political rights did not improve after they allegedly gained entrance into full colonial subject-citizenship.<sup>245</sup> The MPCA not only had to overcome the challenges of union recognition, but had the added responsibility of demonstrating that East Indian laborers were modernized citizens deserving of full and equal rights within the Empire.

### **The new Guianese order**

In promoting East Indians as an imperial community, Edun’s MPCA rested on imperial ideas of modernity. The Empire molded modern imperial subject-citizen through social institutions that emphasized the universality of citizenship and singularity of community amongst different colonial populations. In practice, this meant that the state provided and regulated social institutions, like education and regulation of the family, because they were the foundation for building community. To Edun, “family life must be inviolable to the RPI state,” and women “must [not] give man-power service except that of domestic duties and feminine avocations.”<sup>246</sup> Unlike the BGEIA, which viewed women as the carriers of traditional culture and “constructed...collective identities by asserting the right to define ‘their’ own women,” the MPCA re-categorized women, and by extension the

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<sup>244</sup> Sinha, “Premonitions of the Past,” 823.

<sup>245</sup> CO950/675.

<sup>246</sup> Edun, *London’s Heart Probe and Britain’s Destiny*, 201-02.

inner sphere, to a public location under the purview of the imperial state.<sup>247</sup> For example, the MPCA petitioned to the Moyne Commission to protect female laborers from the “indignity” that they experienced when they had to wade “breast-deep in the water,” “lift their clothing before they enter the water,” and “tell the men—‘Brothers hide your faces that we may pass.’”<sup>248</sup> The MPCA implicated the Commission members in their descriptions of how the overseers abused women, who the MPCA depicted as gendered imperial subject-citizens. In these descriptions, the MPCA did not racialize the women as explicitly East Indian, nor did they refer to the women as ‘theirs.’ Instead, they spoke of the women laborers as experiencing a burden that should be relieved—the burden of undignified labor for the modern woman. In doing so, they re-positioned women as gendered objects that the Commission was responsible for and as objects of the wider imperial community. The MPCA aspired for the state to be central in social life: “It is essential to the well-being of a modern and rationally governed State to make sex-relationship a national concern of exceptionally vital importance, and it should never be pampered or tampered with by religious and social prudery and fanaticism.”<sup>249</sup> Referencing the alternative forms of sex-relationship in the colonies, Edun reinforced the cultural-colonial hierarchy that affirmed Asian and African practices as backward, and demonstrated his own identification with an imperial value system that promoted ideals of the family and the gendered division of labor.

Edun’s ideological position rested on the premise that modernization meant shedding cultural practices that would undermine the political-social community. In his view, modern imperial citizenship entailed full participation in imperial social institutions and acceptance of a social order that put the maintenance of the Empire first. For example, his position on education was that children “must be the children of the RPI state. After the child is five years of age the State must

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<sup>247</sup> Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 8.

<sup>248</sup> CO950/675

<sup>249</sup> Edun, *London’s Heart Probe and Britain’s Destiny*, 66.



entirely control the child's educational training."<sup>250</sup> By allocating children from the cultural or spiritual social sphere to the politico-social sphere, Edun clearly outlined what he viewed as the community. Furthermore, in splitting social issues from culture, Edun promoted a community based on a cross-section of the working-class between East Indian and other colonized peoples. Simply put, social institutions had previously reinforced the boundaries of community; by eliminating culture as the requirement for entry into community and basis for the provisions of social institutions, the boundaries of the community became more flexible to include all the subject-citizen residents of the colony.

While the MPCA rejected notions of racialized cultural difference, they promoted East Indians' central position in the colony because of their agricultural disposition. East Indians became a socio-economic class within the Empire based on their monolithic socioeconomic history and position in British Guiana. In the President's New Year's Address of 1938, Edun referenced East Indian "adaptability, resourcefulness, inherent peaceful and law-abiding characteristics"—the same racialized tropes used to justify the indentured system and colonial economic control—as the reasons why East Indians would make good imperial citizens.<sup>251</sup> While the rhetoric that came out of the MPCA's executive committee mirrored that of the BGEIA in that it utilized racialized colonial stereotypes to describe East Indians, the MPCA moved away from the claim that East Indians' culture was a primordial identity; the MPCA used these characterizations as evidence of the British Guianese East Indian subject's contribution to the Empire.

In the MPCA's viewpoint, the socio-economic forces of indenture and capitalism had brutalized East Indian culture, thus East Indians had to reclaim their culture. For instance, in his New Year's Message in 1939, Edun emphasized themes of "redemption," "renaissance," and

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<sup>250</sup> Edun, *London's Heart Probe and Britain's Destiny*, 201.

<sup>251</sup> "President's New Year's Address 1939," in Man-power Citizens' Association, *Foundation Souvenir, 1936-1939* (Demerara: Blanche A. Hazel, 1939).

“reconstruction” focusing specifically on uplifting the character of the East Indian community.<sup>252</sup>

Edun described East Indians as subject to an earlier “curse” that they “renounced,” referring to the conditions of British colonialism that subjected East Indians to a state of oppression.<sup>253</sup> He asserted how in their state of renaissance, “the Indian people will once again hearken to their teaching of yore, of love, of brotherhood, and Soul of Force.”<sup>254</sup> The MPCA utilized East Indians’ identity as a way to mobilize the East Indian laboring class to support mass action:

I visualize not team spirit but an individualistic tendency of the worst type on the part of all Guianese. Mahatma Gandhi in his original style wrote this—‘If the hundred and fifty millions of Indians can only unite and spit in unison such an accumulation will become an ocean of spit in which the hundred foreigners would be drowned.’<sup>255</sup>...I make this exhortation of Mahatma Gandhi in the spirit of the Season of New Year which has just begun, feeling confident that it will be taken to heart and that all Indians will...begin a new order of things in British Guiana.<sup>256</sup>

By evoking a misconstrued version of Gandhi’s ideology and the Indian nationalist cause, the MPCA grounded itself as an ethnically oriented organization and aligned itself with the principles of community organization based on an intersection of class and cultural lines. Speaking to diasporic East Indians in British Guiana, the MPCA evoked solidarity in the relatively newer colony with a distant homeland. However, in stating that East Indians can “begin a new order of things,” the MPCA harkened back to ideas about forming British Guiana as an East Indian colony. Yet, their idea of belonging and allegiance transcended an East Indian community in British Guiana; they viewed

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<sup>252</sup> “President’s New Year’s Address 1939,” in Man-power Citizens’ Association, *Foundation Souvenir, 1936-1939* (Demerara: Blanche A. Hazel, 1939).

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> This is likely a misinterpretation or misconstrual of Gandhi’s philosophy of “spinning,” a symbolic act that encapsulated the goal of “Swadeshi” or self-economic production that was aimed at dislodging the British Empire from India.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

themselves as part of the international “British Raj,” to which they aspired to be “good citizens.”<sup>257</sup> Their nationalist project evoked the discourse of an Indian Diaspora, an imperial product that still existed within the framework of the Empire. The MPCA mobilized East Indians’ cultural identity an integral aspect of the transnational imperial polity, rather than as the antithesis of modern subjecthood.

As part of their advocacy for workers to be viewed as a modern part of the Empire, the union also recognized the necessity to advocate for specific provisions for East Indians as the central socio-economic class in British Guiana. In a *Guiana Review* article, Edun stated that “it has given us considerable heart-aching to have to counsel the Indian community against our own cherished aspiration of Guianese solidarity, we cannot blink at the facts that the illiterate working masses of British Guiana and rice plantations...need the guiding hand of strong leadership, combined with Official representation.”<sup>258</sup> “Official representation” in this passage refers to the Indian Agent General, an form of special representation for East Indians, which the MPCA justified by claiming that because East Indians laborers were socio-economically disadvantaged during of the indenture system, they needed a way to represent themselves in the absence of universal adult suffrage. The union’s demands for political representation mirrored the BGEIA’s when the MPCA called for special representation for East Indians.

Whereas the BGEIA advocated for the IAG as a necessary intermediary that could translate the needs of the East Indians, the MPCA advocated for the IAG as a temporary alternative to universal suffrage and political representation for labor. In the 1941 Commission on suffrage, Edun clarified his position stating that he is “not advocating [communal representation] but if we are not going to get adult suffrage we will have to make some representation.”<sup>259</sup> The IAG in this model was

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> An article in the *Guiana Review* of Sunday 4 December 1938, CO950/675

<sup>259</sup> *Report of the British Guiana Franchise Commission, Evidence of Witnesses and Exhibits* Georgetown, Demerara: The Argosy Ltd., 1944).

meant to help correct the gross inequalities perpetuated by the indenture system and bring East Indians to a competitive level of socio-economic status. The IAG's principal task would have been the "establishing and maintaining of mutual confidence" between the laborers, their leaders, and the Department of Labor, which directly tackled the issue of lack of formal organization amongst the East Indian laborers, and the animosity between the middle-class East Indian labor leaders and the planter class.<sup>260</sup> While the MPCA departed from advocating for separate institutions for East Indians, their program still relied on the presumption that East Indians constituted a homogenous class.

The MPCA conceptualized East Indian sugar estate workers, as the majority, as the foundation of the working class and the prototypical working-class subject. As a racialized socio-economic class, notions of "East Indian-ness" peppered the agricultural working class' rhetoric. For instance, in the MPCA's New Years' Message of 1939, Edun stated that "Indians...will look forward to some kind of goal of nation-hood in these parts to which we aspire as good Citizens."<sup>261</sup> The main recipients of this message were East Indians; the MPCA viewed all other ethnicities as secondary or at least on the periphery of this working class movement: the MPCA asked Non-Indian members to "cement the bond of fellowship with their Indian comrades."<sup>262</sup> In the MPCA's movement, the center of the political vision was East Indians and their culture. In the transition from "immigrants" to permanent subject-citizens of the British Guianese colony, there was also a recognition that East Indians comprised the majority ethnicity, giving them greater claim to centrality. This entailed a re-ordering of the colonial polity as a national body where East Indians fostered a greater sense of permanence and belonging in the colony. As the core constituency, East Indians no longer needed to protect or preserve their culture, since the MPCA imagined it becoming the dominant culture through their newly realized majority position. Additionally, by evoking the language of the nation, the

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<sup>260</sup> An article in the *Guiana Review* of Sunday 4 December 1938, CO950/675

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid*; [*emphasis mine*].

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*.

MPCA also hinted at universal concepts of citizenship that placed East Indians on the same standing as subject-citizens as metropolitan citizens, extending the MPCA's re-ordering to all of the Empire.

### **The 'political' and the 'social' merge: a creole community emerges**

After the two-month strike period from September to October 1936, Governor Northcote commissioned a report to investigate the causes and main grievances of the sugar estate workers. The Commission made one recommendation to ensure the vitality of the system, which was the establishment of the "Labor Inspectorate," a position inspired by a similar position in Malaya, that would oversee the entire industrial labor economy and head the Labor Department. The Labor Inspectorate, which materialized in 1938, was responsible for "the efficient safeguarding of the interests of both employed and employer."<sup>263</sup> In effect, the presence of a colonial framework of labor representation would limit the need for labor unions as an interlocuter and clamp down on direct or militant challenges to the colonial-planter complex. The Labor Inspectorate had a similar role to that of the IAG during the indenture era, except that the position was in charge of overseeing all labor in the colony. This removed racialized consideration from labor negotiations and considered all laborers as virtually homogenous. For the MPCA, the introduction of a government official who oversaw a class-based entity marginalized their ideas about the exceptionalism of *East Indian* workers in British Guiana. The new colonial working-class imaginary envisioned a creolized national body because the colonial authorities now saw workers as complete products of the Empire.

In 1941, the Moyne Commission cemented the trajectory of this policy when their recommendations recast the socio-economic structural issues that the colonial authorities saw the cause of the region-wide labor unrest—such as gendered relations of work, education, and family—into

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<sup>263</sup> CO111/739/1

general creole social dysfunctions.<sup>264</sup> The Commission based their recommendations off of their investigation into and treatment of the labor unrest across the West Indies as regional phenomena. The Commission recommended the same set of policy for all the colonies across the West Indies, which minimized the different contexts that prompted strike action on a colony-level. The Commission stated that “there [was] a pressing need for large expenditure on social services and development which not even the least poor of the West Indian Colonies can hope to undertake from their own resources.”<sup>265</sup> Thus, they introduced the West Indian Welfare Fund, an annual grant of \$1,000,000 from the Imperial Exchequer under the control of the Comptroller, as a way to spearhead independent, non-governmental social “schemes.”<sup>266</sup> The West Indian Welfare Fund included schemes such as state-sponsored education, the unification of medical services and formulation of long-term health policies, re-structuring of both urban and rural housing, the reform of the Labor Ordinance, and the development of “social welfare committees” in each colony. These recommendations addressed the laboring classes’ grievances superficially; they did not address the systemic and colony-specific causes that permitted the issues to arise in the first place, which in British Guiana were the privileged position of the planter class, the flawed constitutional system that hindered working class representation, and lack of structural avenues for workers to organize. The decision to attribute grievances to region-wide social dysfunctions and to exclude systemic political or economic causes was itself a political act that removed the colonial authorities from culpability.

Unlike prior colonial policy line, where ascriptive “communities” defined by their primordial identities and “notions of collective interest and affiliation” determined the mode of governance, after the Moyne Commission, the colonial authorities in the West Indies disintegrated community-

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<sup>264</sup> Howard Johnson argues that “the Moyne Commission was therefore primarily intended to marshal authoritative support for a line of action which the Colonial Office had already decided on,” in “The West Indies and the Conversion of the British Official Classes to the Development Idea,” *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 15, no. 1 (1977): 76.

<sup>265</sup> *West India Royal Commission 1938-39, Recommendations* (Moyne Commission Recommendations), Cm. 6174, (London: HMSO, 1940), 9.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

based rule since they did not see ethnic-cultural communities as timeless or native to the land.<sup>267</sup> The Commission lumped all colonized people of the West Indies into the single category of “creole” that rendered them homogenous and backward. For East Indian organizations like the BGEIA, who demanded East Indians’ ethnic and cultural autonomy, the new policy line effectively de-legitimized their cause by stating that issues that were previously linked to East Indians’ ethnic difference were instead issues of general creole social dysfunction in the colonies that could be improved. One reason that East Indian anticolonial nationalism based on claims to the “spiritual domain” may not have developed further, as it did in India, was because the colonial authorities, as recommended by the Moyne Commission, asserted control over many of the issues that were previously under the purview of East Indian organizations. The colonial authorities justified these policies through the guise of *creole* social improvement.

The Moyne Commission recommended for colonial authorities to undertake social work since they saw it as the responsibility of the Colonial Government to guide the colonized peoples who they claimed “have lost their original cultures,” and initiate “constructive efforts to provide a satisfactory alternative are long overdue.”<sup>268</sup> In other words, because of the nature of the West Indies as an imperial construction, African and Indian cultures could no longer serve as resources for constructing political subjecthood. With East Indian increasing numerically and demanding separate facilities and forms of governance, the Moyne Commission took a hard line against treating East Indians as a separate cultural community:

East Indians should not in their own interests or those of the colonies in which they have now taken up permanent residence be treated as a separate community...In the circumstances, any measures which cause the East Indians to look upon themselves, or to be

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<sup>267</sup> Prakash as quoted in Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 8.

<sup>268</sup> *West India Royal Commission Report* (Moyne Commission Report), Cm. 6607, (London: HMSO, June 1945), 429.

looked upon as a people apart will at once pave the way for inter-racial rivalries and jealousies and at the same time prejudice the proper handling of the many problems involving all the peoples of the West Indies.<sup>269</sup>

The Commission challenged the demands for separate treatment through the justification of maintaining “law and order.” Because East Indians’ demands for treatment as a cultural-political constituency threatened the new colonial order, the Moyne Commission announced that East Indian interests aligned with West Indian creole community, effectively eliminating any possible challenges to the political system based on the British Guianese majority’s alignment away from the colony. This impacted the East Indian community since it re-politicized social issues that related to East Indians’ socio-economic position, which resulted from their prior treatment as a racialized “community apart,” and folded them into solutions for social dysfunctions on a region-wide level.

The introduction of homogenized social welfare provisions through the West Indian Welfare Fund for the “improvement of education, the health services, housing and slum clearance, the creation of labor departments, the provision of social welfare facilities, and land settlement” pathologized the process of creole acculturation and decreased the agency of colonized populations in developing their own local communities, and by extension, identities in each colony.<sup>270</sup> The colony authorities, through their efforts to transition creole-born East Indians into the national imperial body, subsumed them into a “creole” body, which was dominated by the Black creole experience historically. Therefore, while the Commission aligned with the MPCA’s goals of incorporating East Indians in the public sphere, the new regional scale posed a threat to the MPCA’s claim to British Guianese East Indian centrality in the Colony, and by extension, the Empire. The new regional program minimized how East Indians in the British Guiana constituted the single largest ethnicity and thus had a

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Moyne Commission Report, 428.



different political context to other East Indian communities in the West Indies that were minorities in their respective colonies of residence.<sup>271</sup>

The Commission focused their policies on constructing a single social sphere that aligned with a creole community of the British West Indies. The Commission recommended that education, especially, be controlled because they viewed it as the “systematic transmission from one generation to another of the knowledge, customs, traditions, aptitudes.”<sup>272</sup> Meaning that, education was the system that would enable the colonial authorities to correct social dysfunctions and instruct the colonized creole peoples into their new social roles. With regard to education in the West Indies, the colonial authorities thought it was important to adopt a system suited to the agricultural make-up of the economy. The Commission recommended for vocational training to replace “literary” or “cultural” education, stating that “education has a moral as well as a technical aspect...we mean their use for the mutual benefit of the individual and of the community,” which implied that education should benefit the Colony and create productive members of society.<sup>273</sup> Education was one way of eliminating the autonomy of the “inner sphere” and moving it fully into public purview, which reduced the potential for alternative notions of imperial citizenship to emerge and allowed colonial authorities to intervene in building modern creole subjecthood.

Specifically, regarding East Indians, the colonial authorities worked to standardize their education with that of the Creole Black peoples. Dispatches from the Development and Welfare Controller to the colonial authorities of British Guiana displayed their plans for government schools to be reformed and standardized in rural areas. For instance, the welfare scheme re-organized Anna Regina, the principal rural government school near an agricultural station and land settlement, into

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

primary and junior departments with a strong emphasis on “agriculture, handicraft and house-craft.”<sup>274</sup> By emphasizing skills, the new educational system intended to create a productive body of workers that would contribute to the colonial community: vocational training created a sustainable workforce by adapting the education system to the economic needs of the colony at the expense of educating the residents of the colony in a liberal fashion equal to that valued in the metropolitan system. When colonial authorities eliminated curricula based on passing down East Indian languages, religion, and traditions, the subsequent creole-born generations would not be as connected to their ethnic identities.

Educational reform also focused on controlling familial patterns in the region; the reformed educational curricula emphasized instructing young girls to be wives and mothers: “if there are to be happy marriages, girls must be able to [be] companions to their husbands and therefore need every opportunity for as wide a cultural education as possible.”<sup>275</sup> Cultural education, in this context, meant vocational training in “domestic science.”<sup>276</sup> The Commission singled out how this was particularly an issue for East Indian communities, because they had the lowest rates of young girl attendance beyond the primary school level. The focus on girls’ education as a way to improve the standard of living of the creole community was an indirect way for the colonial authorities to appear to address the flaws in the socio-economic structure by reforming the family. By promoting a nuclear family structure akin to those in Europe, the colonial authorities thought that creole peoples would naturally fall into gendered and hierarchical roles, abandon their former practices, and constitute a singular community.

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<sup>274</sup> CO318/450/8

<sup>275</sup> Moyne Commission Report, 130.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Social reforms focused in particular on women because colonial authorities assumed a “position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood” of East Indian and other cultures.<sup>277</sup> In the colonies, the colonial authorities saw creole women (which included East Indian women) as an “index of social backwardness.”<sup>278</sup> Women themselves were not the subjects nor the objects of reform, but the ground or means by which colonial officials could achieve their style of rule, in the view of Lata Mani discussing the Indian context.<sup>279</sup> Sinha describes how social reforms for women were often pitted against demands for political reforms in Colonial India, that colonial authorities “urged Indians to put their ‘homes’ in order and concentrate on social as opposed to political reforms.”<sup>280</sup>

In the West Indies in a later period, however, the Commission linked women’s freedom to social upheaval; the commission claimed that their education, employment and sexual patterns disrupted patterns of communal and familial belonging. In describing women who worked in agricultural fields, the commission linked her position as an income generator to her abdication of familial responsibilities and production of immoral citizens:

Most commonly her work is in the fields; after feeding her family she must start out from her home in the early morning, often leaving little or no food in the house for her children whose main meal may have to wait for her return in the evening....If she alone is responsible for the support of a family, her position is indeed difficult and there can be little cause for wonder that a combination of economic circumstances and natural irresponsibility so often leads a woman...to seek the uncertain help afforded by association with yet another man.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993), 118.

<sup>278</sup> Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, 43.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> Moyne Commission Report, 216.

These observations, stated as fact, were imbued with racialized characteristics that justified colonial intervention. By using language like “natural irresponsibility,” the colonial authorities painted a picture of a creole community that did not have the capacity to better itself. Harkening back to the racialized tropes of East Indian women as promiscuous and East Indian men as jealous and unhinged, the social reforms proposed instructed creole—both Black and East Indian—women to adhere to a narrow construct of modern womanhood. The colonial authorities scapegoated women and attributed all socio-economic ills to their social habits, implying that the socio-economic system was in disarray because there was no hierarchical family structure in creole households. In their eyes, women were the breadwinners, children worked, and men were irresponsible by fathering multiple families. However, it fell to women to correct the system by controlling their sexual patterns. Thus, the Commission sponsored an “organized campaign against the social, moral and economic evils of promiscuity” to “help to create among the people themselves a desire to raise the standard of their daily life” in a way acceptable to colonial ideas of proper citizenship and subjecthood.<sup>282</sup>

Programs aimed at improving the “unfortunate” position of women extended beyond education; they included material improvements in infrastructure that colonial authorities viewed as facilitating immoral lifestyles. The commission stated that unmarried cohabitation, which was frequently interchanged with “promiscuity” in colonial descriptions, was the result of “bad housing, with overcrowded rooms shared by adults and children of both sexes; of the absence of education in civic responsibility and sex hygiene; of the poor facilities for the occupation of hours of leisure; and of the denial, through poverty, of that display which the love of the West Indian for color and gaiety leads him to associate with the ceremony of marriage.”<sup>283</sup> Unmarried cohabitation was an issue for colonial authorities because it disrupted the order of society, where men were the heads of households.

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<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

For East Indians, referred to in the Moyne Commission as “estate labor,” “estates should provide the land including vegetable plots and give reasonable security of tenure, and the houses should be built under approved schemes.”<sup>284</sup> The Commission recommended cottages instead of reformed ranges, since they believed that it was more conducive to the nuclear family. Through promoting the nuclear family with the male breadwinner as the social model, the Commission promoted children and women as economic dependents and hid their contributions to the plantation system, in particular. When colonial authorities redirected issues of the home into public space, they paralleled the MPCA’s vision that promoted a singular imperial-national community and mirrored their ideas about the family as the building block of society.

However, the focus on the family as the site of societal problems generated a colonial discourse of culturalist explanations at the level of the homogenous regional “creole,” and program of self-improvement that eclipsed demands for politico-economic reform at the level of empire that the MPCA desired. The scale at which the proposed community operated posed a difficulty for the MPCA, since the regional creole community established a narrow political space for East Indians in British Guiana to contest. As J.M. Lee describes, the Colonial Office became an organization that focused on “subject” considerations at the expense of “geographical” needs.<sup>285</sup> Between April 1939 and December 1942, the number of “administrative class officers on the ‘geographical’ side was reduced from 73 to 53, and in personnel from 83 to 53, while those in the ‘subject’ departments increased from 66 to 170.3,” as explained by Lee.<sup>286</sup> Through changing the scope of their administrators, the Commission instituted policies that marginalized forms of subjecthood other than creole in the West Indies. The Commission and its subsequent policies only considered issues directly related

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<sup>284</sup> Moyne Commission Report, 436-37.

<sup>285</sup> J.M. Lee, “Forward Thinking’ and War: The Colonial Office During the 1940s,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 6, no. 1 (1977): 66.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

to the status of East Indians as West Indian creole citizens (and not as former East Indian immigrants) as productive or legitimate. By re-categorizing East Indians from a regional minority to a creolized population, the colonial authorities nullified the MPCA's demands for East Indian centrality in imperial discourse. Furthermore, the Moyne Commission's support of a regional creole body opened up the possibility for a West Indian Federation as an Imperial Dominion. The new context, which viewed the West Indies, including British Guiana, as a creole space, redefined what was desirable for each ethnic group in British Guiana. While the MPCA emphasized forms of East Indian belonging, permanence, and possibilities as a majority and central community, their vision was dependent on British Guiana's unique place in the Empire as a fundamentally East Indian colony. In a regional federal body, East Indian of British Guiana would constitute an ethnic minority; this disrupted the significance of the merging of the political and social, which now posed a dilemma for the MPCA's vision.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored how the MPCA re-envisioned the model of the Empire and the terms of imperial subject-citizenship. The evolving context of the thirties brought on spontaneous labor disturbances since East Indians' place in the colony changed rapidly. The MPCA emerged in a politico-economic environment where the BGEIA failed to organize East Indians into a separate cultural group. This vision of East Indians' participation in colonial society departed from the BGEIA's vision, which had proposed completely alternative structures for East Indian governance and transformed amenities for East Indian social life in the colony. East Indians became a socio-economic class within the Empire based on their monolithic socioeconomic history and position in British Guiana, not because of their fixed cultural community. East Indian laborers, specifically, became the MPCA's central working-class subjects. In treating East Indians as the working-class imaginary, the

MPCA reaffirmed East Indians as a dominant culture in British Guiana, cemented their permanence, and established their centrality.

However, new colonial policies, recommended by the Moyne Commission, focused on social reform for all colonized peoples in the West Indies, and treated East Indians as part of the wider creole community. This effectively narrowed the contestable political space since a rhetoric of collective social rehabilitation took over that of social-cultural difference, and colonial authorities repositioned British Guiana from a singular colony to a subset of a region. Through the forties, the Labor Department and the Development and Welfare Act subsumed East Indians under an imaginary of a regional working class that privileged creole workers. As diasporic subjects with a “minority complex,” within the West Indies, East Indians saw themselves protected within the imperial discourse of universal citizenship; their revisions of the Empire embracing racial diversity appealed to them over the Black creole nationalist discourse developing in the West Indies at the time that marginalized East Indian experience and threatened to turn East Indians’ demographic majority in British Guiana into a minority interest within a regional space. The colonial movement toward creole as a signifier for colonial resident of Caribbean generated a discourse that homogenized Caribbean diasporic peoples into a single category. In this discourse, diasporic East Indians, who followed a historic trajectory where they were still deeply intertwined with British Colonial India and their Indian culture, had little room to negotiate their socio-economic specificity as legitimate worldview and understand their presence and significance in the imperial-national body.

## Conclusion

East Indians' diasporic political visions each had a particular, local genealogy. The vision espoused by the estate workers broadened the lifeworld of East Indians within the indentured system. Meanwhile, the BGEIA's vision questioned which community East Indians belonged to and established a greater sense of home in the colony. And, later the MPCA's vision challenged the politico-economic system that disadvantaged East Indians on the basis of their identity and proposed a version of citizenship that privileged East Indians' agricultural position. These visions centered around the question of how to imagine their identity and place as the colony evolved. They combined ideas of an amorphous transnational network, as well as a local place of home to make sense of East Indians' position as caused by the Empire and to foster their sense of belonging. Each political vision aspired to shape the colonial and imperial policies to better suit the vision of diasporic East Indian life in British Guiana. And, each political vision set the foundation for diasporic East Indians to form their own definitions of belonging and citizenship.

Throughout this project, I have demonstrated the variety of East Indian possibilities in British Guiana, starting from the late years of indentured servitude through the sugar estate riots in the early forties. Early East Indian political visions focused on transforming the conditions of East Indian life in the colony by restructuring housing, designating time off to develop a social community, and remodeling gender roles. Transformations of the social conditions of life in the colony expanded East Indian lifeworld through developing non-economic aspects of personhood, like community, family, and religion. While it is difficult to develop a full picture of early political visions, because of the system of indenture, low literacy rates and language barriers that inhibited East Indians from organizing and recording their aspirations, the colonial documentation of their strike actions expressed hints of a budding consciousness. Through demanding facilities that would give them



identities outside their role as labor capital, East Indian laborers contested their place as sources of labor in the colonial British Guianese plantation society. However, laborers aspirations were still within the capitalist framework: they aspired to acquire land and form rice plots that would expand their individual socio-economic position. During the early twentieth century, East Indians bifurcated between the indentured laborers and the free laborers, the latter of which had some opportunities to grow into a middle-class.

Middle-class East Indians formed the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA) in 1916, the tail-end of the indenture period. This middle-class group, which included people of professions such as tailors, shopkeepers, and small landowners, had a different political vision than that of the estate laborers. This group, which declared itself to be the natural leader of the community, focused on uplifting East Indians, forming a homogenous community and promoting an electoral bloc. Their vision focused on a new model of citizenship that resisted the forces of creolization and emphasized an “authentic” culture to differentiate the East Indian population from the rest of British Guianese society. The BGEIA’s vision marked the genesis of a strand of visions that valued political assimilation into existing colonial structures even as they sought to retain a space of cultural autonomy. The BGEIA, as a self-declared interlocutor for East Indian agricultural laborers, acted paternalistically toward the majority of East Indians, since they prioritized middle-class voices as the only legitimate expression of political consciousness. This theme continued into the next stage of political visions, as expressed through the Man-power Citizens’ Association (MPCA).

The MPCA, founded by two breakaway members from the BGEIA who were frustrated with the middle-classes’ treatment of the East Indian laborers, aligned itself closely with the model of Labour organizing exported from the metropole. While the union recognized the unique position of East Indians in the colony, their ultimate aim was for East Indians to become modern imperial subject-citizens: the union used an imperial organizing framework, declared their allegiance to the

British Empire and desired for East Indians (and other colonized peoples) to be valued members of a wider imagining of British society. In this vision, East Indians' source of oppression was not colonial political rule itself, but the ways in which the developing capitalist system intertwined with politics. The MPCA thought that the East Indian community could escape their position as economically oppressed subjects by combining the political-economic and social spheres to form a singular community of belonging. The MPCA also grappled with exactly how to transform the foundation of East Indians' identity from a cultural to a socioeconomic base. In this vision, East Indians were the majority demographic, and therefore central culture in British Guiana, lessening the need for enclavization. However, the Moyne Commission and Colonial Office's policies of developing a homogeneous regional creole community to govern marginalized British Guianese East Indians and eclipsed the various contingencies for East Indian centrality and permanence.

This project aimed to re-constitute the autonomy of diasporic East Indians in the development of their various political imaginaries. With respect to these imaginaries, it is vital to understand how East Indians' perception of their position in the colonial system directly influenced what they aspired toward in their visions. While not every ideology in the beginning of the twentieth century can be categorically labeled anticolonial, each of these visions had glimmers of desires to reform or transcend the colonial system's constraints on their livelihoods. These early imaginaries are testaments to the creativity of individuals in constrained environments since they carved out spaces for themselves—and those they considered to be their peers—to direct their own lives and destinies.

Through culture, East Indians negotiated their terms of belonging in the colony. Culture became a way of carving out the kind of political identities possible and desirable for East Indians. At the beginning of the indenture system, their status as transitional laborers relegated them to the periphery of the colonial British Guianese imaginary. At the center of the colonial imaginary were the Black creole workers, who based their claim to centrality on time: creole Black Guianese defined

their connection to British Guiana through their longevity. However, as more East Indian immigrated and settled, the colonial polity experienced a demographic shift. As the new ethnic majority, East Indians claimed centrality in the British Guianese imaginary through their majority status. They interpreted British Guiana as coming from an agricultural tradition. East Indians, as the majority agricultural body, had an alternate reading of British Guiana: the centers of which were the coastal agricultural fields, the plantation laborers, and the East Indians. The competing conceptions of transnational and local belonging, where cultural became explicitly mobilized and politicized, were products of the struggle for hegemony in the public sphere.

As the two diasporic communities both defined local belonging, two alternate public spheres emerged that positioned British Guiana differently. In one, British Guianese citizens were part of a wider Caribbean body, and in the other, British Guianese citizens were integral to the global Empire. Moving onto the track of decolonization, the central subjects would determine the type of polity Guyana would become. The question in Guiana (and later Guyana) throughout the twentieth century was how to reconcile two diasporic communities with their separate definitions of belonging and claims to centrality in one polity? These early imaginaries reveal the complexity behind political identity formation in the Guianese context. The tension between Afro-Guianese and Indo-Guianese was not innate. As demonstrated, it was the result of an ongoing debate, originating in the colonial period, about the place of culture in definitions of citizenship. Culture became a worldview; it mediated societal place temporally and spatially. The case of Guyana highlights the importance of studying the intersections of politics, culture, and diaspora, since diasporic communities of belonging never correlated with a national body, leaving the country in a seemingly ever-lasting conflict as cultural worldviews diverged.

## Epilogue

Decolonization siloed Guianese diasporic imaginaries further into the nation-state model. After Guyanese independence in 1964, local politics came to reflect race: Indo- and Afro-Guyanese communities could not achieve a consensus on what is Guyana, what is Guyanese, and what does it mean to be a citizen in Guyana. Arjun Appadurai names this process “culturalism,” or the “conscious mobilization of cultural difference in the service of larger national or transnational politics.”<sup>287</sup> In British Guiana, the Afro-Guyanese supported People’s National Congress (PNC) and the Indo-Guyanese backed People’s Progressive Party (PPP), between whom political rule flip-flopped through the late twentieth century, ossified culture as an aspect as ethnic group identity.

In 2015, David Granger of the Afro-Guyanese Partnership for National Unity and Alliance for Change (APNU+AFC) won the presidential election, swinging the pendulum back toward the PNC after nearly 25 years of PPP rule.<sup>288</sup> However, in 2018, the PPP and Charandass Persaud of the APNU+AFC conducted a no-confidence vote against the PNC government. An election should have been held 90 days after the no-confidence vote. But, the PNC challenged Persaud’s voting eligibility and the electoral clock, which postponed the elections.

On 2 March 2020, Guyana finally conducted an election between Granger and Irfaan Ali of the PPP/C. After the initial voting, both parties declared themselves as the victor. As of 7 May 2020, the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) began their vote recount, but has not yet reached a conclusion.<sup>289</sup> Additionally, the United States, Canada and United Nation appealed for the Carter

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<sup>287</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 15.

<sup>288</sup> A Partnership for National Unity + The Alliance for Change (APNU+AFC) is a political coalition formed in 2011 consisting of the Guyana Action Party, the Guyana Association of Local Authorities, the Guyana National Congress, the Guyana People's Partnership, the Guyana Youth Congress, the Justice for All Party, the National Democratic Front, the National Front Alliance, the People's National Congress (PNC) and the Working People's Alliance. In 2015, the alliance won 33 seats, which allowed David Granger to become president.

<sup>289</sup> Stabroek News, “Day Six: GECOM recounts 53 boxes,” *Stabroek News*, 12 May 2020.

Center to observe the vote recount, however their mission did not secure approval from the current government.<sup>290</sup>

The popular media portrays the current electoral crisis as the result of primordial ethnic tensions: the journal *Foreign Policy* states that the “ethnic violence unleashed during [the 1960s when the CIA intervened in the decolonization process] still scars the country today;” *the New York Times* states that “the [oil] discoveries have also exacerbated the country’s entrenched ethnic divisions,” and that party preference is determined by “tradition and allegiance to their own group rather than policies.”<sup>291</sup> While these statements ring true, they minimize what ethnicity is a signifier for. The descriptions of politics rely on tropes of unbreachable ethnic divide starting once Guyana gained independence and during the CIA-manipulated years in the sixties, but the ethnic divide stems from a longer-standing difference in how each population was introduced into the colony, how they fostered belonging and made sense of their own identities.

The rigid state of racially divided politics is a symptom of a bigger problem in Guyana: how the Indo- and Afro-Guyanese communities ossified culture after independence. In competition for political dominance after troubled independence from Great Britain, the Indo- and Afro-Guyanese communities resorted to “vote with your own kind” tactics as a way to enshrine their political vision through the electoral system. This has resulted in large schisms between the two parties’ visions and constituencies. While major think tanks in the United States, notably the Carter Center, recommend a system of power-sharing to resolve the historic battle between the PPP and PNC, power-sharing will do little to resolve the conflict.<sup>292</sup>

Guyana operates at an interesting intersection of two major diasporas: Black diaspora and

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<sup>290</sup> Stabroek News, “Carter Center observer denied approval to fly to Guyana,” *Stabroek News*, 5 May 2020.

<sup>291</sup> Jason S. Calder, “Ethnic Conflict Threatens Democracy in Guyana,” *Foreign Policy*, 26 March 2020; Anatoly Kurmanaev, “Oil Bonanza Plunges Guyana into a Political Crisis,” *The New York Times*, 5 March 2020.

<sup>292</sup> The Carter Center encouraged reform of the “winner-take-all” election system currently in use.

the Indian diaspora. In many ways, there is no nation outside of these diasporas. I challenge the necessity of creating a singular national identity, as expressed under the slogans of “One People, One Nation, One Destiny,” was “central to the representation of the new nation” as a *postcolonial* state promoted unity in diversity.<sup>293</sup> The motto was developed under post-independence PNC and Burnham, who aligned Guyana more closely with the Black diaspora, inadvertently created a mainstream and central ethnic discourse and marginalized the history of not only one of the major diasporic groups, but the diasporic communities that are smaller in number and Amerindians that were pushed to the physical peripheries of the nation-state. The model of a singular national identity may not suit Guyana. Instead of coalescing under the experiences of shared struggle and fixing the national imaginary, that national political space needs to be opened and remain so for contestation. This way the Guyanese people can use their cultural identities as more than a signifier for their ethnic belonging. Culture can become as a lens to interpret subject-positions and create contingencies for different models of citizenship and relationships to the political community.

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<sup>293</sup> Christina Kay Fawcett, “One People, One Nation, One Destiny’: Mahadai Das and the Ideology of Progress in Postcolonial Guyana,” *Selected Papers from the Conference held at the University of Warwick UK, 1st - 3rd July 2002 and from the Northern Networks Research Seminars* Vol 3 (2002).

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