THE SHORTAGE OF LABOR

Guyana Table of Contents

Political, economic, and social life in the 1800s was dominated by a European planter class. Although the smallest group in terms of numbers, members of the plantocracy had links to British commercial interests in London and often enjoyed close ties to the governor, who was appointed by the monarch. The plantocracy also controlled exports and the working conditions of the majority of the population. The next social stratum consisted of a small number of freed slaves, many of mixed African and European heritage, in addition to some Portuguese merchants. At the lowest level of society was the majority, the African slaves who lived and worked in the countryside, where the plantations were located. Unconnected to colonial life, small groups of Amerindians lived in the hinterland.

Colonial life was changed radically by the demise of slavery. Although the international slave trade was abolished in the British Empire in 1807, slavery itself continued. However, the momentum for abolition remained, and by 1838 total emancipation had been effected. The end of slavery had several ramifications. Most significantly, many former slaves rapidly departed the plantations. Some ex-slaves moved to towns and villages, feeling that field labor was degrading and inconsistent with freedom, but others pooled their resources to purchase the abandoned estates of their former masters and created village communities. Establishing small settlements provided the new Afro-Guyanese communities an opportunity to grow and sell food, an extension of a practice under which slaves had been allowed to keep the money that came from the sale of any surplus produce. The emergence of an independent-minded Afro-Guyanese peasant class, however, threatened the planters' political power, inasmuch as the planters no longer held a near-monopoly on the colony's economic activity.

Emancipation also resulted in the introduction of new ethnic and cultural groups into British Guiana. The departure of the Afro-Guyanese from the sugar plantations soon led to labor shortages. After unsuccessful attempts throughout the 1800s to attract Portuguese workers from Madeira, the estate owners were again left with an inadequate supply of labor. The Portuguese had not taken to plantation work and soon moved into other parts of the economy, especially retail business, where they became competitors with the new Afro-Guyanese middle class. Some 14,000 Chinese came to the colony between 1853 and 1912. Like their Portuguese predecessors, the Chinese forsook the plantations for the retail trades and soon became assimilated into Guianese society.

Concerned about the plantations' shrinking labor pool and the potential decline of the sugar sector, British authorities, like their counterparts in Dutch Guiana, began to contract for the services of poorly paid indentured workers from India. The East Indians, as this group was known locally, signed on for a certain number of years, after which, in theory, they would return to India with their savings from working in the sugar fields. The introduction of indentured East Indian workers alleviated the labor shortage and added another group to Guyana's ethnic mix.