

Decreasing Tensions and Assimilation

Introduction:

Thankfully, there were signs that the tension and divide was decreasing, slowly but surely. Quite a bit of cultural assimilation took place.

1. It is fair to argue that both the Indians and the Chinese immigrants began to adopt European culture in their manner of **dress** in particular. Indian women in their saris and even worse, men in their dhotis were ridiculed, laughed at and talked about. After a few years this mode of attire was replaced by what they had seen and what was available in the West Indies.

2. Bridget Brereton, (Social Life in the Caribbean 1838-1938) tells us that in British Guiana (Guyana) a number of Indians adopted the Creole **custom** of the wake (nine night). Indian men could also be seen at the wakes of their departed Creole friends.

3. The Indians and Chinese realized that they were the subject of ridicule because of their **language** and 'strange' accent. As a survival strategy therefore, they began to learn the English Language, used it more in public and reserved their native language for the homes where of course, it was definitely accepted. Some even decided to give their children who were born in the West Indies either English names or easier names for their friends to pronounce.

4. **Conversion to Christianity** - By the early 1900's a sizeable group of immigrants had converted to Christianity. Much credit must be given to the Catholics and Canadian Presbyterian Society as well as the others who worked assiduously in this area. We find also, that many of these persons who became Christians also opted for a Western marriage ceremony instead of the practices and customs they would have used if they were in their native land.

One would expect also that as time passed both immigrants and Creoles served on the same committees, sat in the same pews and eventually began to relate better with one another. It is fair to argue that both Chinese and Indian immigrants worked on charity and various fund raising events at their Churches. They became well liked for their success in this area, as you would imagine.

5. Education - At first, parents in Trinidad and British Guiana in particular were afraid to send their children to public schools. They were reluctant to do so because they either felt or heard of instances where children of immigrants were mocked and abused. As time went by they realized that education was perhaps the single most important means of social mobility for the children of working class. Amidst these fears they sent their children to these public schools. Again with time, the children became friends on the playground. In the classrooms, as children tend to do, they devised various little mischievous acts and pranks together.

6. Cultural assimilation took place in the area of **food**. The groups shared or passed on various recipes to each other. Curry is now a favourite Caribbean seasoning. Chinese restaurants became popular.



Curried chicken



Chinese chicken

7. By the 1940's the Chinese were an example of a **progressive and successful** minority group. Through their various commercial activities they had made a **significant contribution to the economic development** of their host countries. How did they manage to accomplish this? Through hard work, determination and thrift.

8. The Chinese shopkeepers operated the **trust system** in their wholesale and harbadashery stores. They credited or 'trust' the blacks the goods that they so badly needed until pay day. They often kept a little book where they recorded what the peasants had 'trusted' and the amount. They sold vital consumer goods such as foodstuff: flour, cornmeal, saltfish and such in very small quantities.

Even when they were aware that they were being teased, they gave polite service and attention to the blacks. This was something that the blacks had not experienced from the Portuguese merchants. They felt that they could trust the 'Chineyman'. On the other hand, it was said that the Portuguese engaged in

fraudulent business practices such as short weighting the goods. The first self serve supermarket was opened by the Chinese in St. Andrew, Jamaica.

9. The Chinese also operated ice cream parlours and restaurants. These became a source of social release.

10. By the 1940's they **sat on various municipal councils**. They sent their children to school and they excelled. They became professionals: physicians, dentists and lawyers- who gave **quality service to their clients without discriminating on the basis of race or status**. Many were in the Government medical services.

11. While it is true to argue that the Chinese maintained much of their own cultural practices we must also note that they did mix with the other races. **Eugene Chin**, (Trinidad) son of Chinese immigrants, used his garden to host cocktail parties, games and even open air meetings. It is not difficult to see then how they came to earn the respect of the masses as well as members of the ruling class.

12. The laborers irrespective of their races faced adverse working conditions on the estates. Together, they planned and executed strikes and other methods of resistance. For example, **the Duckenfield (St. Thomas) estate riot in 1885**.



Chinese immigrant workers on a sugar cane plantation

13. The tension decreased because **interracial marriages** took place. To use an old cliché, love sees no barrier and regards no class. So, naturally some of the immigrants fell in love with people from the other groupings and formed permanent relationships. Some got married.

14. Persons from different groups lived together in the same communities. While this is a source of conflict it is also a source of unity. For some persons living together in the same place with someone of a different culture presented problems (conflicts) for others it represented opportunity. They travelled to the river and washed clothes together. They passed the time together talking and sharing as they worked together.