The Indian Population in Trinidad and Tobago

MUKUL K. DEY

Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

The dismal conditions under which the Indians emigrated as labourers, the exploitation they suffered at the hands of the European plantation owners and their agents, and the contempt or apprehension with which they have been treated by the other classes of residents in their overseas homes – all these and related matters have been the subject-matters of many books and numerous articles written by Indian as well as non-Indian scholars. However, the mere demographic aspect of the issue has been largely overlooked. How has the number of Indians changed during a century of settlement in each of the overseas territories where they settled? What has been the trend of their natural increase? What is their future population likely to be? Has their demographic behaviour been like that of their brethren in India? How do their population characteristics compare with those of the other groups of people in their overseas home? These questions demand careful enquiries.

The Fiji Islands is the only area so far with respect to which such issues have been looked into. The results of this inquiry have been reported in an excellent monograph by Lambert.\(^1\) Lambert’s observations which are complete only upto 1938, together with certain supplementary details furnished by the present author on the basis of later demographic data, are briefly stated as follows: - In 1876 when the Fijian chiefs “ceded” their island homes to the Empire of Queen Victoria, the Fijian natives had an estimated population of 200,000. Immediately after the cession, there occurred a series of epidemic diseases to which the Fijians were not immunized, and by 1905 their number dropped to 87,000. The population of the Fijians remained stationary during the next decade and assumed the lowest ever volume of 83,000 in 1919. It steadily increased since that year and finally reached the figure of 123,896 in 1950. The indentured labourers from India started coming in 1879. Between this year and 1916 when assisted migration ceased, from 40,000 to 50,000 Indians immigrated into the colony, while only a small proportion of them returned to India at the

\(^1\) S. M. Lambert, *East Indian and Fijian in Fiji: their Changing Numerical Relations* (Honolulu, Hawaii: Published by the Museum, 1938).
expiry of their tenure. Though they reproduced themselves slowly at first since the number of women among them was inadequate, their population soon started increasing at an accelerated rate. From 43,000 in 1911 their number became 85,000 in 1936 and it reached 138,425 by 1950. In 1945, the Indians outnumbered the Fijians for the first time; and their numerical superiority is becoming more marked each year. The reason for this differential population growth lies more in natural increase than in the balance of migration. The Indian birth rates have been generally high and death rates generally low in comparison with the Fijian rates. The fertility and gross reproduction rates also have been higher with the Indians. It appears on the whole that the Indians may continue to grow at the same rapid rate for several decades to come.

In the present article are reported the results of an attempt at extending to the colony of Trinidad and Tobago the kind of investigation which Lambert made for the Fiji Islands. This country is populated by several ethnic groups mutually distinguished along both racial and cultural dimensions. The principal ones among them are the Indians, Africans and Mixed people who are customarily referred to in the official records as “East Indians”, “Blacks” and “Mixed and Coloured”, respectively. The last-named group consists of the “coloured” people who are the products of the mixture of the European and African strains, the “East Indian Creoles” (hybrid of the Indian and all other strains) and the “Chinese Creoles” (hybrid of the Chinese and all other strains). Also included in this group are a considerable number of people from Venezuela having the Amerindian element. In addition to these three principal groups, there are the groups made of the Europeans, Chinese and Syrians which are much smaller. Among all the ethnic groups inhabiting Trinidad and Tobago, the Africans have the largest population. Their percentage in the total population was found to be 46.88 in the census of 1946. The next largest group is formed by the Indians, their number being 35.09 percent of the total population in 1946. Next comes in the order of decreasing population size, the mixed and coloured people (14.12 percent), Europeans (2.74 percent), Chinese (1.01 percent) and Syrians (0.16 percent).

In compliance with the pattern of Lambert’s investigation on the populations of the Indians and of the Fijians in the Fiji Islands, the following questions were taken up for inquiries in the investigation reported in this article: - (1) By what course did the volume of the Indian population in Trinidad and Tobago change from the time of early settlement till the present period? (2) What parts were played by migration and natural increase (or decrease) in such changes? (3) What would possibly be the future population trend of the overseas Indians in this country? (4) How would the population trends of the overseas Indians compare with those of the other ethnic groups inhabiting this country?

The facts that the Indians have been regularly enumerated since 1851 when the first census was taken in Trinidad and Tobago and that their vital statistics were recorded since 1921 when the recording of vital statistics began in this colony enabled the author to tackle the first three of the four questions posed