

Indo-Guyanese Civic Development and Politicization, 1918-1950

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The Paul Nyhus Travel Grant enabled me to travel to the National Archives and the British Library in London to conduct primary source research for my upcoming honors project on the post-indenture experience of East Indians in the Caribbean. The historiography on pre-independence Guyana and the cache of primary sources on colonial Guyana are limited, and thus my two week trip aimed to gather materials—colonial papers, memorandums, and newspaper clippings—essential to start to answer my main research question: what did forms of political organizing and resistance look like for East Indians in Guyana post-1917?

The first week of my trip centered on the National Archives, where I set out to gather information three separate sugar strikes from 1918 to 1948. Each strike resulted in a commission of enquiry into the state of affairs of the sugar industry, colony, and wider Caribbean. The commissions were essential to understand how the colonial government responded to ‘disturbances’ through gendered and racialized conclusions. After reading the commissions in full, I dug deeper into the correspondence between the colonial government and the various East Indian civil society organizations. The back and forth dialogue gave me insight into the rationale for the colonial government not granting Indian sugar laborers their demands, and a greater understanding of the structure and function of the organizations formed by the East Indian community. I left the archives with a deep understanding of the status of East Indians in Guyana as transitory labor instead of full citizens, and the struggles the community had at changing this perception and gaining unalienable rights, like franchise, education, and marriage.

While originally I intended to spend the entirety of my week second at the British Library to look at the India Office’s records, I altered my research plan to spend more time at the archives. I found that the India Office, while involved in the lives of the formerly indentured initially, had less of a role in guiding the colonial government policy. Adapting my research plan was unnerving as I took a risk omitting potential sources at the British Library, however by deciding to look more deeply in the Colonial Office’s papers, I was able to expand the stock of materials to include photographs, for instance.

Directly penning through physical documents in the Archives taught me hard skills in primary source research that I hope to carry forth past my undergraduate degree. I learned how to categorize material relevant or irrelevant to my scope, use large catalogues, and handle sensitive archival documents. My honors project would not be able to continue without the skills and knowledge I acquired this trip, and thus I am sincerely grateful for this research opportunity.

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