

Merchants of the Caribbean

In the melee of ethnic and linguistic amalgamation in the Caribbean thrives a community of Sindhis, writes **Deepak Bhojwani**

Daulatram Boolchand Nandwani, affectionately and respectfully known as Dada Boolchand to us, became Honorary Consul of India in 1978 for the Dutch Antilles. In the year 2000, seventy-five year old Dada handed over that mantle to his son Ram.

Today, the Boolchand family presides over a business empire worth well over US\$ 100 million, stretching from Curaçao and Aruba in the southwestern corner of the Caribbean Sea, to St Maarten, St Thomas and St Kitts, at the northeastern end of the arc of tiny islands.

Europeans discovered and colonised this region over five centuries ago, and continue to influence it through direct colonial control or historical institutional links. French, British, Dutch, and U.S.-ruled or controlled territories co-exist with Spanish speaking island States in this warm blue basin. European languages frequently give way to the local Papiamentu, an amalgam of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and English, with local vocabulary giving it a distinct flavour.

In the melee of ethnic and linguistic confusion, in this tourist haven, thrives a community of several thousand Sindhis.

Authentic records of migration are scarce. One of the earliest to arrive was Pohoomal, who left Hyderabad, Sindh, in undivided India in 1850. Sailing from Karachi, he reached Bilbao, Panama through the Suez Canal via Cairo, Malta, and Tanger in Morocco. Front Street in Bilbao was very conducive to the Sindhi ethos. Like most duty-free, low tax business environments that have mushroomed in the Caribbean, it allowed the native Sindhi trading genius to flourish. He was followed by M. Dialdas in Curaçao and Parmanand Kripalani in Trinidad in 1925; Tikamdas Khiantomal in Jamaica in 1928; Chhugani in St Maarten and others in Barbados, St Thomas, Puerto Rico and the islands of the Dutch and French Antilles.

Braving severe challenges, with precious little capital, the pioneers began amassing fortunes by importing cheap Asian cloth and gift items, electronics and other prod-



The Temple at Curaçao.

ucts, which found a ready market among visitors. The community expanded through a tightly organised system of recruitment of young Sindhis from back home.

'Sindhwork' normally involved a three-year contract through which, the recruit accepted a salary he seldom needed to spend, since his living expenses were covered by the employer. Several employees lived in one house or apartment, with no vacation during the contract period, most working seven days a week. Most businessmen set up stores selling textiles, groceries, then electronics and graduated to expensive jewellery.

Today the streets of high-end resorts of Curaçao, St Maarten, St Thomas, Aruba, and others are lined with Sindhi shops selling ex-

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pensive jewellery, watches and other fashionable wares to American and European tourists. Some have opened supermarkets and department stores while others have started small universities and even hotels. Their wives and sons belong to, and associate with, the upper echelons of society and lead lavish lifestyles. At home, Sindhi food is the norm.

In 1975, Dada Boolchand started the Indian Merchants Association of the Netherlands Antilles (IMANA), a successful venture repeated on many other islands where associations and clubs, promoted mainly by the Sindhis, serve as a social anchor. A lavish temple was consecrated in Curaçao in 2005, which also boasts a crematorium, all thanks to voluntary contributions to the IMANA. With an average of over a thousand Sindhis on each of at least 10 islands, Bollywood movies and even live concerts are a regular feature.

Younger members of the community, however, still complain of lack of adequate educational and recreational opportunities. College education and marriages have therefore seen an exodus, though a regular inflow of Sindhi employees and brides or grooms as the case may be, have stabilised the population. There has also been some intermarriage with local communities.

Most of these Sindhis are fiercely patriotic about Bollywood or the Indian cricket team's performance, as any Indian citizen. The vast majority hold foreign passports, but travel to India regularly and are increasingly looking at their former homeland as an attractive investment destination.

Contrasted with the geographic dispersal of the community in India, their concentration in the Caribbean makes for an interesting study of this cameo image of India. The community deserves recognition and commendation for the success it has achieved entirely through its pioneering efforts, and its determination to stay as faithful as it can to its cultural roots. 🇮🇳

(Widely regarded as an expert on Latin American-Indian affairs, Deepak Bhojwani has served as an Indian Ambassador in seven Latin American countries.)