

Migration of Indians to the Caribbean Region

From 1838 to 1917, over half a million Indians from the former British Raj or British India, were taken to thirteen mainland and island nations in the Caribbean as Indentured workers to address the demand for sugar cane plantation labour following the abolition of slavery. Attempts at importing Portuguese, Chinese and others as indentured laborers had failed. Much like cotton, sugarcane plantations motivated large scale near-enslavement and forced migrations in the 19th and early 20th century.

Following the emancipation of slaves in 1833 in the United Kingdom, many liberated Africans left their former masters. This created an economic chaos for British owners of sugar-cane plantations in the Caribbean region, and elsewhere. The hard work in hot, humid farms required a regular, docile and low-waged labour force. The British looked for cheap labour. Since slavery had been abolished, the British crafted a new legal system of forced labour, which in many ways resembled enslavement. Instead of calling them slaves, they were called indentured labourers. Indians, primarily began to replace Africans previously brought as slaves, under this indentured labour scheme to serve on sugarcane plantations across the British empire.

Indian Arrival in the Caribbean Region

Name of Destination Colony	Arrival Year	Language Spoken
Guyana (British Guiana)	1838	English
Trinidad	1845	English
Jamaica	1845	English
Martinique	1853	French
Guadeloupe	1854	French
Cayenne (French Guiana)	1854	French
Belize (British Honduras)	1857	English
Grenada	1857	English
St. Lucia	1859	English
St. Vincent	1861	English
St. Kitts (St. Christopher)	1861	English
St. Croix (Danish West Indies)	1863	English
Suriname (Dutch Guiana)	1873	Dutch



The first ships carrying *indentured* labourers for sugarcane plantations left India in 1838 for the Caribbean region. In fact, the first two shiploads of Indians arrived in British Guiana (now Guyana) on May 5, 1838 on board the *Whitby* and *Hesperus*. These ships had sailed from Calcutta. In the early decades of the sugarcane-driven migrations, *indentured* Indians were treated as inhumanely as the enslaved Africans had been. They were confined to their estates and paid a pitiful salary. Any breach of contract brought automatic criminal penalties and imprisonment. Many of these were brought away from their homelands deceptively.

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Many from inland regions over a thousand kilometers from seaports were promised jobs, were not told the work they were being hired for, or that they would leave their homeland and communities. They were hustled aboard the waiting ships, unprepared for the long and arduous four-month sea journey. Charles Anderson, a special magistrate investigating these sugarcane plantations, wrote to the British Colonial Secretary declaring that with few exceptions, the indentured labourers are treated with great and unjust severity; plantation owners enforced work in sugarcane farms so harshly, that the decaying remains of immigrants were frequently discovered in sugarcane fields. If labourers protested and refused to work, they were not paid or fed: they simply starved.

History of PIOs in the Caribbean Region by Deo Gosine (Cont'd)

The sugarcane plantation-driven migrations led to ethnically significant presence of Indians in Caribbean. In some islands and countries, these Indo-Caribbean migrants now constitute a significant proportion of the population. Sugarcane plantations and citizens of Indian origin continue to thrive in countries such as Guyana, formerly British Guiana, Jamaica, Trinidad, Martinique, French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent, St Kitts, St Croix, Suriname and Nevis.

By some estimates, over 2.5 million people in the Caribbean are of Indian origin. Many have ethnically blended with migrants from other parts of the world, creating a unique syncretic culture. Not just British colonies, sugarcane production affected human history in colonies controlled by other pre-World War II powers. France, for example, negotiated with Britain leading to Act XLVI of 1860, whereby large numbers of Indian *indentured* labourers were brought for harsh sugarcane plantation work in French colonies in the Caribbean region. The Caribbean colonies of the Netherlands too benefitted from the indentured laborers from India.

In recent years, attempts to commemorate the Indian presence and contributions have come to fruition: In 1995, Jamaica started to celebrate the arrival of Indians in Old Harbour Bay, St. Catherine Parish on May 13. In 2003, Martinique celebrated the 150th anniversary of Indian arrival. Guadeloupe did the same in 2004. These celebrations were not the fact of just the Indian minority, but the official recognition by the French and local authorities of their integration and their wide-scale contributions in various fields from Agriculture to Education, Politics and to the diversification of the culture of the Creole peoples. Thus, the noted participation of the whole multi-ethnic population of the two islands were in these events.

St. Lucia and many Caribbean countries have dedicated commemorative days to acknowledge the arrival and important contributions of their Indo-Caribbean populations. St. Lucia celebrates its Indo-Caribbean heritage on May 6. Other dates when the India Arrival Day is celebrated in the Caribbean include May 5 (Guyana), May 10 (Jamaica), May 30 (Trinidad and Tobago), June 1 (St. Vincent), and June 5 (Suriname).



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