

Proudly Indo-Caribbean: A Transnational Journey Through Indentured Servitude

Speaker: Bhonita Singh

Resources and Further Reading:

- <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56183697e4b0beb41666a064/t/56340d3ee4b01aa7927ff753/1446251838454/Guyanese+Hindi+Dictionary.pdf>
- <https://theprint.in/world/new-york-times-called-out-for-labelling-indo-guyanese-people-descendants-of-farmhands/377324/>
- <http://guygenbiosociety.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.vc.id.au/edg/index.html> (Guyana Colonial Newspapers)
- <https://www.vc.id.au/tb/> (British Guiana Colonists)
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- *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*, By Marina Carter & Khal Torabully
- *Asian Indentured Labor in the 19th and Early 20th Century Colonial Plantation World*, by Richard B. Allen
- <https://www.economist.com/international/2017/09/02/the-legacy-of-indian-migration-to-european-colonies>
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- Dunn, Richard. *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* 1972.
- *Indo-Caribbean World* - has been in existence for 25 years
- *Caribbean Xpress* - has been in existence for five years
- *Indo-Caribbean Times* - existed for about two years; ceased publication after the death of one its founding members in April 2010
- <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56183697e4b0beb41666a064/t/56340d3ee4b01aa7927ff753/1446251838454/Guyanese+Hindi+Dictionary.pdf>
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- <https://www.familytreemagazine.com/records/now-what-indentured-servants/>
- <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-33>
- <http://www.caribbean-atlas.com/en/themes/waves-of-colonization-and-control-in-the-caribbean/waves-of-colonization/the-experience-of-indian-indenture-in-trinidad-arrival-and-settlement.html>
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- <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>
- <https://www.candoo.com/genresources/#GUYANA> (surname index, list of researchers/archivists, for the larger Caribbean as well, not only those with high Indo-Caribbean populations)
- file:///Users/bhonitasingh/Downloads/How%20and%20when%20Venezuela%20_lost_%20the%20island%20of%20Trinidad.pdf

Historical Background Information

Introduction:

The Caribbean takes its name from the Indigenous people [in English: Carib, and from Spanish; Caribe] which comes from a word in the Arawakan language group (most likely Taino according to linguists) meaning human being.

GEOGRAPHY: Situated largely on the Caribbean Plate, the region has more than 700 islands, islets, reefs and cays.

Three main Island arcs delineate the eastern and northern edges of the Caribbean Sea: the Greater Antilles on the north and the Lesser Antilles on the south and east (which includes the Leeward Antilles).

They form the West Indies with the nearby Lucayan Archipelago (The Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands), which are sometimes considered to be a part of the Caribbean despite not bordering the Caribbean Sea.

On the mainland, Belize, Nicaragua, the Caribbean region of Colombia, Cozumel, the Yucatán Peninsula, Margarita Island, and Guyana, Suriname, French Guiana, Guyana Region in Venezuela, and Amapá in Brazil are often included due to their political and cultural ties with the region.

BEFORE EUROPEAN CONTACT:

At the time of the European arrival, three major Amerindian indigenous peoples lived on the islands:

- The Taíno (sometimes also referred to as Arawak) in the Greater Antilles, the Bahamas and the Leeward Islands;
- The Island Caribs
- The Galibi in the Windward Islands;

The Taínos are subdivided into Classic Taínos, who occupied Hispaniola (present day Dominican Republic and Haiti) and Puerto Rico.

Western Taínos, who occupied Cuba, Jamaica, and the Bahamian archipelago, and the Eastern Taínos, who occupied the Leeward Islands.

Trinidad and Guyana were inhabited by both Carib speaking and Arawak-speaking groups.

SPANISH CONQUEST: To supplement the shortage of Amerindian labor, the Spanish imported African slaves. Although Spain claimed the entire Caribbean,

they settled on only the larger islands of Hispaniola (1493), Puerto Rico (1508), Jamaica (1509), Cuba (1511), and Trinidad (1530).

ENSLAVEMENT: Agriculture was developed in the Caribbean as a result of the slave trade, wherein a large workforce of Africans were forced into manual labour. The Atlantic slave trade brought enslaved African to British, Dutch, French, Portuguese, and Spanish colonies in the Americas, including the Caribbean. Enslaved people were brought to the Caribbean from the early 16th century until the end of the 19th century. The majority of enslaved people were brought to the Caribbean colonies between 1701 and 1810.

ABOLITION: The trade in people was abolished in the British Empire through the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. Men, women and children who were already enslaved in the British Empire remained enslaved, however, until Britain passed the Slavery Abolition Act. When the Slavery Abolition Act came into force in 1834, roughly 700,000 people in the British West Indies immediately became free; other enslaved workers were freed several years later after a period of forced apprenticeship.

ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION: The exploitation of the Caribbean landscape dates back to the Spanish conquistadors starting in the 1490s, who forced indigenous peoples held by Spanish settlers in encomienda to mine for gold.

The more significant development came when Christopher Columbus wrote back to Spain that the islands were made for sugar development. Much like the Spanish exploited indigenous labor to mine gold, the 17th century brought a new series of oppressors in the form of the Dutch, the English, and the French. By the middle of the 18th century sugar was Britain's largest import which made the Caribbean that much more important as a colony.

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 Caribbean sugar cane plantations. The hard work in hot, humid farms required a regular, docile and low-waged labour force.

INDENTURESHIP: The British looked for cheap labour. This they found initially in China and then mostly in India. The British crafted a new and legal system of forced labour, which in many ways resembled enslavement (indentured servitude). The products produced brought in no profits for the countries since they were sold to the colonial occupant buyer who controlled the price the products were sold at.

This resulted in extremely low wages with no potential for growth since the occupant nations had no intention of selling the products at a higher price to themselves.

The result of this economic exploitation was a plantation dependence which saw the Caribbean nations possessing a large quantity of unskilled workers capable of performing agricultural tasks and not much else. After many years of colonial rule the nations also saw no profits brought into their country since the sugar production was controlled by the colonial rulers. This left the Caribbean nations with little capital to invest towards enhancing any future industries unlike European nations which were developing rapidly and separating themselves technologically and economically from most impoverished nations of the world.

Indentureship across the board occurred between Mid 1830s to early 1920s, following abolition of slavery in the British empire in 1833. It is estimated that there were more than 2.2 million colonial subjects who worked under long-term written contracts (3 to 5+ years). The Indentured signed their contracts by using their thumb-print instead because the majority were illiterate and were unable to even read the papers used to legally sign their life away. It was likely they hadn't even seen or felt paper before.

Significant impact on social, economic, cultural, and political life in many parts of the 19th- and early 20th-century in the colonial plantation world as a majority of indentured men and women labored on sugar plantations in British, Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean, South Africa, the southwestern Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. Another 1.5 million Indians migrated to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Malaya to work as coffee and rubber plantation laborers on short-term oral contracts under what is commonly known as the kangani or maistry system. Indian people were also displaced within the Indian sub-continent to meet the demand for labor on Assam's tea plantations (by the British Raj). Indentured labor historians often treat these two contractual labor systems as separate entities, but they are in-fact constituent elements of a global migrant labor system that encompassed the Caribbean. Especially British Guiana [Guyana], Cuba, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Martinique, Suriname, Tobago, Trinidad, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and the British virgin islands), eastern and southern Africa (Kenya, Natal, Mozambique, Transvaal, Uganda), the southwestern Indian Ocean (Mayotte, Mauritius, Nosy Bé, Réunion), South and Southeast Asia (Assam, Burma [Myanmar], Ceylon [Sri Lanka], Malaya), Australasia (New Caledonia,

Queensland), the central and southern Pacific (Fiji, Hawaii, Samoa, Tahiti, Vanuatu), and Central and South America (Mexico, Peru).

The two largest groups, the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese, have experienced racial tension. The majority of Indo-Guyanese are descended from indentured laborers who came from Bhojpuri-speaking areas of North India. A sizable minority are South Indian, largely of Tamil and Telugu descent.

THE WORD COOLIE:[Coolie] was the bureaucratic Hindu term from India that the British used to describe indentured laborers in a derogatory way. It quickly became a highly charged slur. Although the word "coolie" is primarily associated today with the histories of the Caribbean and South America, indentured labor was a widespread reality in mid-19th century America.

Companies like the Central Pacific Railroad Company signed laborers to five-year contracts (these laborers, among other things, were instrumental in building the transcontinental railroad and other projects in the Western United States). Due to the fact that the laborers were Asian — 9 out of 10 workers on the railroad were Chinese and the remainder were Irish — and because the workers would labor for low wages and live in substandard living conditions, the word "coolie" became a derogatory code for "Asian" (both East and South) in the United States.

The workers were a prime target for criticism by labor leaders, politicians and ordinary citizens, who believed the foreign laborers were depressing wages and unfairly taking jobs. (similarities with other labour movements/societal rhetoric?) The anti-Chinese labor sentiment was so high that in 1862, Abraham Lincoln signed an "anti-coolie" bill that "banned transportation of 'coolies' in ships owned by citizens of the United States of America." Despite the Anti-Coolie Law and the subsequent Chinese Exclusion Act (which passed in 1882 and prohibited Chinese workers from entering the United States), labor leaders and others continued to fear an influx of "coolie labor," especially after the rise of American imperialism in the late 1800s and the early 1900s.

ROLE OF WOMEN: "In India — in the subcontinent — a 'coolie' is someone who carries baggage," said Bahadur (author of coolie woman). "And these women sort of carry the baggage of colonialism; the expectations of white men, the expectations of Indian men. Here they have to sort of preserve family, preserve culture and also preserve themselves". There were very few women in the sugar colonies at the beginning of indenture due to the British solely wanting laborers which meant only men. This caused issues such as fights between the "bound coolies" and "free coolies" + the other local men who were able to socialize with local women unlike their bound counterparts. The British also needed women in

order to reproduce further generations for labor, as well as to cook, clean and take care of men sexually so that they could perform well in the fields. There were also a significant amount of indentured women that performed work in the fields alongside their male counterparts. Children were also present alongside their parents as childcare was not always available by “Keilanis”, especially for free “coolies” who had a different dependence on the work provided by the British.

The women called Keilani’s were kept working in the Baracks for bound coolies until the end of indentureship. This was excused by the British under the assumption that these women were single mothers, prostitutes and otherwise destitute members of society without caste in the Indian subcontinent, so they should be grateful for the work and new opportunities the British gave them in the Caribbean. Women were difficult to bring from India to the sugar colonies on their own accord due to strict societal, cultural and religious practices, so British recruiters would target entire small villages or groups of women walking.

They would kidnap them, rape, beat, and force them against their will into the holding warehouses in Calcutta where they were checked for disease, vaccinated and sent to one of the sugar colonies, all the while , their families waiting for them to come home. The British went to these extreme lengths because there were quotas they had to reach to make sure there were enough women in the colonies. These officers were only paid for coolies that arrived alive and well in the colonies; and keilani women often garnered more.