

Unit 7

Indians in the Caribbean

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Learning objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to describe:

- phases of Indian emigration in the Caribbean;
- common features of Indian immigration;
- experiences of Indian emigrants;
- emergence of Indian identity; and
- cultural strategies of the Indian diaspora.

7.1 Introduction

The score of islands and mainland from Mexico to Panama are popularly called the Caribbean. The area is marked by some geographical peculiarities. It has coral reef formations set in a sub-tropical condition. The region is prone to earthquakes and hurricanes. It has rich fertile soil, which allows cultivation of a variety of products.

The Caribbean now has many independent nations but their history is relatively young. It is recorded from the time Columbus landed in one of the islands there in 1492 A.D. Briefly it may be stated that Caribbean region first came under the control of Spain. For about a century the control of Spain was unbroken but by the early years of the seventeenth century, Spain pulled back from several areas and began to concentrate more on the vast areas of South America. Later other Europeans namely English, French and Dutch came to the Caribbean in swarms. The earlier Spanish presence was tragic, transient and highly exploitative. They ruthlessly destroyed the indigenous populations but did not develop any systematic production system. They ran authoritarian governing systems. Their dominant interest was in metallic extraction. However when other Europeans got a foothold in the various islands and mainland of the Caribbean they developed a thriving plantation economy based on slave labour.

7.2 Three Important Phases

In order to have a quick grasp of the overview of the entire Caribbean region it would be most convenient to view it in three phases namely post-discovery, post-emancipation and post-independence.

In the post-discovery phase, people belonging to different races and languages inhabited the islands. The Europeans had the dominant position. The economy was based on plantation. The policies for these islands were determined in the metropolitan colonial offices. The significance of the post emancipation period was the liberation of the slaves but the plantation economy continued and so also the old type of governance. For our purpose here the most important aspect of this phase was the entry of Indians in the Caribbean as indentured labour. Before we discuss the presence of the Indians in the Caribbean it may be briefly stated that the post-emancipation period saw the beginning of some trade and commerce by the planters and a nascent emergence of the peasantry. The post-independence phase is marked by the emergence of so many independent countries in which coloured people acquired power including Indians. The process of democratization set in and party politics began to play its role. Old white colonial administration came into the hands of the brown and black educated class of people. It saw a definite movement away from plantation economy towards industrialization and modernization. While European powers declined, the United States of America entered as a major player in the Caribbean region. It developed strategic interests and also interest in oil and natural gas. This was the background, by and large, in which the Indians entered the host countries as indentured labourers. In the initial stages, the Indian emigrants encountered difficult times. However, at later stages, there was transformation from that hopeless situation to a better position where they could establish their identity and social security and emerge as an educated and accomplished community engaged in a variety of modern professions.

Indians play a central role in the political arena in several countries. The presence of Indians is noted in Surinam, Trinidad, Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Grenada and St. Lucia in the Caribbean. Though the history of the emergence of the Indians in each place is influenced by the local circumstances particularly by those who were the colonial rulers in the specific country, here we will discuss them in general terms. However, most of the material here has been drawn from the experience in Trinidad.

7.3 Arrival of Indians

Indians were brought to the Caribbean by the colonial administration to safeguard the plantation industry in the wake of abolition of slavery. From the 1830s the East India Company allowed trading in human resources by private agents under a sort of indentured labour scheme. This scheme had to be suspended for a while owing to its widespread abuse. However, Britain came out with the "Colonial Emigration Act, 1837", which was controlled by the East India Company. A set of officers was put in position to oversee the movement of the labourers from India to the various colonies in the Caribbean and elsewhere. In the late 1830s when the emigration of Indians began the situation in India was highly unsettled. There were widespread economic problems. Owing to the Permanent Settlement System, the peasants had already lost their small land holdings. The artisans particularly the weavers lost their occupation owing to the export of cotton. New forest laws had deprived the peasant's access to life-sustaining resources. Epidemics and famines were common features. Ravages of war between the East India Company and the local rulers made the peasantry homeless too. There was continuous persecution by the tax collectors, rent collectors, the zamindars, the moneylenders, and the marauders (*thags*) who would not hesitate to kill for even small gains. The British also started systematic reprisals following the upheaval of 1857.

In the beginning the British were a bit cautious in recruiting Indians as labourers and sending them to overseas colonies for fear of being criticised for bringing slavery in a different form. They began the recruitment from the hinterland of Bihar hoping that the larger society may not notice it. Moreover, the tribes living in that region had less dietary taboos. As a result of the new forest and land regulation some unrest was brewing up even in that area. The British wanted to crush it before it could gather into a storm and recruited labourers from that area and sent the troublemakers overseas.

7.4 Common Features of Immigration

We may briefly highlight some common features of immigration of the Indians in the Caribbean before we discuss the emergence of the Indian identity in that part of the World.

- i) Immigration was spread out over 72 years from 1845-1917, which suggests the inflow the Indian population at regular intervals that was significant in terms of social, cultural and political formation of Indians in the Caribbean.
- ii) People came from different regions of India including southern India but majority of them were from the Indo-Gangetic belt.
- iii) Majority of the people were poor from rural areas and of lower castes. Approximately 15% of them were Muslims.
- iv) The sex ratio among the immigrants was highly imbalanced.
- v) Majority of the people were young. Those who arrived in the first 30 years had hardly any elders as role models.
- vi) Whatever be their social, cultural, economic or religious background, all were recruited as indentured labour on the same terms. This is a very important factor in breaking or shaking the traditional system of social stratification among the Indians.
- vii) Away from their homes and villages, the experience of staying together in depots and being together for a long, difficult and hazardous sea journey, not only made them hard but also generated a 'we' feeling among them cutting across the barriers of caste and religion. They also established a life-long bond such as 'jehajibhai'.
- viii) For the women recruits, depot stay, voyage and work in the colonies was an experience by itself. Perhaps for the first time they were getting wages in their hands as workers. As a result of these they carved out some space for themselves.
- ix) On arrival the Indians were assigned to different estates. In the early years there were a lot of restrictions on their movement. It was only on Sundays they were allowed to move away from their estates, that too after taking permission. All of them suffered a sense of isolation. They were out of their social and cultural network. They were not used to the monotonous nature of work. Their work-supervisors treated them very harshly. A little deviation from work or laziness immediately attracted punishment. Often they were kept in isolation for some petty mistake. The environment was generally hostile.
- x) The former slaves did not like the presence of the Indians. For at the time when the slaves were emancipated they had begun to organize themselves. They had begun to demand better facilities of work and higher wages. They were sure that the planters had no alternative and eventually would negotiate with them. That did not happen. Instead

the planters were able to find a good source of cheap labour, which flourished close to 72 years. So whatever bargaining capacity ex-slaves had vis-à-vis planters was lost and their demand for higher wages could be easily suppressed forever. At the same time a permanent cleavage was created between two sets of labour: ex-slaves and Indians.

- xi) Indians on their part had no choice but to work to their full capacity, otherwise punishment was waiting for them. They were strangers on the island. From people to environment—everything was alien for them. On account of their hard work, production in the plantation got accelerated. There was more demand for labourers from India. The scheme of indentured labour got full support from the planters as well as from the administration. Socially and culturally the Indians were much different from the local populations. They never mixed with them. They also cherished a desire that one day they would be able to go back to their homes but there were so many hurdles on the way.

Box 7.1: Hurdles for Returning Home

The hurdles for returning to the native homes were:

First the dread of returning back on a long and hazardous sea voyage was a serious deterrent. *Second*, the circumstances under which they had left their homes were neither cheerful nor they were sure they would be accepted back.

Third, those who had gone back had depressing experiences.

Fourth, the planters were keen that the experienced Indian labourers stay back in their plantation.

For this they adopted a twin strategy. One, they put maximum hurdles on the Indians so that they did not return after the completion of their term. Second they began to give allurements so that they decided to stay back in the colonies. They offered them land from 1850 onwards and also some money if they surrendered their right to claim free passage back. Later they also allowed them to buy land. Obviously these were big attractions.

Reflection and Action 7.1

Highlight some of the common features of emigration.

7.5 Experiences of the Emigrants

For Indians no doubt there was immense suffering particularly for those who had arrived earlier. Living in barracks under most unhygienic and cramped conditions was an entirely new experience. They were not only strangers to the total environment but often to each other. Their next-door neighbour could be a person from an entirely different region whose language and culture could be very different. However, there were common threads too. They were all labourers and had to put up with the same hostile and adverse conditions. They worked hard but at the same time led a simple life and believed in saving. Once they were offered land and some bounty in lieu of surrendering their right to claim free passage for going back home people grabbed these and reindentured themselves for a further period of five years. Later they were also given the opportunity to buy land. Majority of them reinvested eighty percent of their savings in buying free plots of land. This was encouraged by the colonial administration for several reasons. First,

this way the planters were assured of the continued services of the experienced hands and allowed them to save some energy, time and money in getting an entirely new set of inexperienced workers trained. Second, the Indians began to make the land productive by growing paddy and numerous other things. Till then the plantation economy had been peculiar in the sense what people grew was for a distant market and what people consumed was imported from distant places. Thus by growing consumable farm products the Indians began to give a new shape to the Caribbean economy. Besides, in terms of economy, it suited ideally both the planters and the colonial government to shift the burden of feeding the population at least partly, on to the ex-plantation workers themselves. Third, many of the Indians who for some reason were not willing to work in the plantation after the expiry of the term and were considered as vagrant were getting productively employed.

7.6 Emergence of Indian Identity

Identity formation is a complex phenomenon depending upon a variety of factors. The Indians who had decided to stay back were trying to carve out a way of life, develop a set of social relationships and institutions among themselves, and also had to participate in the social, political and economic life of the emerging nations - the nations which were located in the Western hemisphere, dominated by the Western thought, values and Christian religion. Modern science and technology too were rapidly evolving and casting their impact on the lives of the people. The early Indian settlers recognised all this, and they also recognised that acquiring modern education was an important means of enhancing their life-chances. They desired and sought education for their children. But the education available at that time had a price tag and that was conversion to Christianity. This added a Christian dimension to the Indian community of the Hindus and the Muslims. Along with the growing demand for education, the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian missionaries also were active. Some sought reforms, some wanted them to go back to fundamental values of traditional practices of their religion and some wanted them to convert to other faiths. These created agreements and disagreements among the settlers. In other words, identity formation was not one single linear progression. Some scholars thought that in course of time Indians like other populations in the Caribbean would get creolised while others felt that Indians persisted with their traditional values and cultures. Both of these views have their own merit but the fact is that the Indians have projected an identity of their own in a multi-ethnic situation of the countries in which they live, which shows some creolisation, some persistence and some creation.

We may here briefly summarise the factors, which have contributed to the formation of Indian identity.

1. **Ancient Civilization:** The long civilization history of the Indians was very useful. In the Western sense, the immigrants were illiterate but were well educated in their social, cultural, religious and moral tradition. Identity formation was greatly helped by repeated recitations of epic stories like Ramayana, Mahabharata and numerous other stories. These stories contain a wealth of information on social and cultural life as well as on moral values. Some cultural specialists began to interpret these stories and tell people how to conduct their lives as elders, as husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, friends and so on.
2. **Population:** Emergence of Indian identity is correlated to the size of the

population in relation to the total population. Wherever their population was significant Indian identity has emerged strongly like in Trinidad, Surinam, Guadeloupe, and Martinique and to some extent in Jamaica, Grenada and St. Lucia.

3. **Land:** The decision to have land in lieu of their right to claim free passage back to India was very significant. This meant a shift from transient to permanent settler status. For the Indians land was a valuable asset, it provided them subsistence, economic stability and helped them to move up in the social hierarchy. It also helped them to gain their economic independence. The places where they obtained land became nuclei for the formation of Indian villages.
4. **Villages:** The formation of the villages was a turning point in the history of the Indians in Trinidad. These were generally uni-ethnic villages. The process of the Indians settling in the rural areas was further helped by the fact that the Blacks were generally moving away from the land-related activities. For the Indians it was indeed a great change. After having done ten years of degrading industrial labour in cane cultivation, constantly under harsh supervision and living in crowded barracks, they were living in the villages founded by them and as free persons at last. They got the opportunity to reconstruct their way of life by shedding some aspects, reformulating some and creating some new aspects in their cultural baggage. The new environment circumscribed all this.
5. **Events in India:** As the indentured labour kept on coming to the Caribbean for close to seventy two years the Indians kept themselves relatively abreast about the events in their native land. The conditions were chaotic when they left India. The revolt of 1857 against the Britishers was ruthlessly suppressed but the seeds for the Indian independence were sown which later took the shape of a mass movement. A number of highly dedicated and charismatic Indian leaders were emerging on the Indian scene which generated a new awakening in the country and which also gave some sense of confidence and pride to the Indian emigrants. They were becoming familiar with popular Indian slogans such as Inqalab Zindabad (long live revolution) , Gandhi Zindabad (long live Gandhi) and so on. The later emigrants were familiar with the idea of Indian independence. They brought a sense of belief and confidence in their own culture and traditions. They knew that their leaders were fighting to throw off the yoke of colonialism. They had also learnt a new tool of resistance that was 'satyagraha' (fight for truth). In popular terms it meant passive resistance.
6. **Political Action:** In Trinidad between 1880 and 1914 there were at least 18 major strikes on plantation estates by the Indian settlers. The most important outcome of these strikes was that it brought people together on a common platform. Suffering under a common adversary was a powerful binding force among the ethnically diverse Indian population. The Indians formed their own organizations and took up a variety of issues such as protection against certain immigration ordinances, pressing the administration for the employment of Indians in government service, for legal recognition of Hindu and Muslim marriages, recognition of their traditional funeral rites, etc. At about the same time, educated Indians began to articulate their views in newspapers published in the island. Wide circulation of the views contributed to the increasing sense of group solidarity among the Indians. Also these activities conveyed a message to the governments in power that the Indian community existed

and was capable of organising itself in defense of its group interest. They also contributed money for the welfare of the victims of the famine back in India. Who else would have known better about the pains of hunger than the Indian emigrants!

7. **Indian Family:** In the Caribbean, it is popularly believed that the Indian families as compared to that of other ethnic groups were stable and different. The family was one of the institutions most dramatically affected by migration. First, in most cases people had come as individuals, leaving behind all other members of the nuclear and extended families back in their home in India. Second, on migration, the sex ratio among them was highly imbalanced. Third, they did not have elders among them to guide them. In spite of this situation the Indians did not show any inclination to marry outside their community, especially among the Blacks. The Indian family that evolved over the years was basically nuclear but retained a joint family model, in the sense that the members of the extended family generally lived in the same compound or in the neighbourhood. The family was relatively stable. The value of the filial solidarity was retained. Members of the extended family got together for celebration of numerous life-cycle rituals and seasonal festivals. On such occasions they not only helped and supported each other but also get an opportunity to fulfill their mutual obligations. Frequent interaction among themselves brought in a certain degree of solidarity and reinforcement of ties.
8. **Films & music:** The introduction of films and popular music from India from the late 1930s sparked a cultural awakening among the Indians. Later they also developed their own classical, devotional and popular form of music, which reinforced their identity.
9. **Religious activities:** Most Hindu religious traditions involve observance of life-cycle rituals, worship of the many gods and goddesses which they think ensures them a wholesome life, healthy children, good yields from their land, protect them and their crops and cattle from diseases, evil spirits and hazards. Singing devotional songs and recitation of religious texts, particularly Ramayan are other aspects of the Hindu religious practices. The Indians may have gone to the Caribbean from different regions of India with different religious practices but once they have settled there they tried to homogenize those practices. For their social and cultural survival this was an urgent and essential demand. On one hand, the others considered Indians as heathens and they were being persistently persuaded to give up their traditional beliefs and adopt Christian practices and ideology. On the other, the Indians needed to celebrate births, puberty and marriage, and appropriately mourn deaths. They also needed to express their gratitude to the Almighty for their survival. During their hazardous voyages and stay in barracks they had experienced that there was a very thin line between life and death. Invocation of the deities and seeking their blessings could not be postponed. They had to come to some agreement among themselves on these matters and get along with their lives. The missionaries and reformers, who came from India, also helped them in the process of homogenization.

Reflection and Action 7.2

Discuss the factors that contributed to the formation of Indian identity in the Caribbean.

This particular aspect is very well reflected in temple construction and temple architecture in the Caribbean. In the beginning temples were small, made of bamboo. The temples constructed after the 1950s were relatively large and had a raised area where all deities were enshrined, and a dome topped the temples. The deities could be viewed by the audiences sitting on the benches, in the style of churches. The hall was utilized for religious discourses and congregational worship. The Hindu religious environment in and around temple was further strengthened by putting up various symbols like Jhandis (flags of different colour), Om signs, plants such as Pipal, Neem, Tulsi, Bel etc. etc.

10. **Cuisine:** Indian cuisine is a strong identity marker. The Indian food, the way it is processed, cooked and eaten is quite distinctive, particularly the food that is prepared for ceremonial occasions. The Indians, particularly the Hindus observe a variety of food taboos. Vegetarian food is considered to be high ranking. All ceremonial food is vegetarian. Like religious practices Indian cuisine too has been standardized to a great extent. In the process of standardization they have also created some new food items, which have become very popular.

Box 7.2: Cultural strategies

There are many other cultural strategies that Indians adopted to form their identity and preserve it. In a hostile environment, in particular, these strategies are likely to come in all kinds of innocent activities and formal forms. Each of them interconnects people, link ideas and mythologies, generate moods and motivations and transmit messages. A pattern starts emerging. A culture gets constructed and its boundaries get marked. A culture is an on-going phenomenon with some anchorage. So many things happen at the same time. There are compelling economic and political circumstances, which create pressures for some and opportunities for others for cultural expressions. Think of the hopeless, illiterate Indian peasant uprooted from his surroundings, surviving a shattering sea journey and planted in a hostile and unsympathetic environment. Whatever he had in the name of culture was perceived as heathen, degrading and also contested by the fellow next-door neighbour. He was coerced and also enticed to convert himself.

There were other compelling circumstances too, but he resisted, recoiled, withdrew, advanced and changed, and yet he did not become what was expected of him. He adopted the old, created some and constructed a cultural system, which gave him a sense of satisfaction, a feel-good phenomenon. For instance, those who converted to Christianity became the favoured ones. They got education, acquired professional skills and jobs. Their status went up in the larger society. But they were still identified as Indian. Whatever personal agenda they may have had, they became facilitators of the Indian identity. They established bi-directional communication. They played the role of cultural brokers. They became the spokesmen for the Indians. Similarly the temple architecture was changed so that people may walk in to participate in 'Sunday Service' and hear not Bible sermons but Vedic hymns, Ramayana, devotional songs, ringing of bells and blowing of conches. These are but a few examples, which illustrate how the Indians were able to establish their identity.

7.7 Conclusion

It is indeed an enigma that all along the Indians in the Caribbean have been treated as a transient population. This image continues even now. The self-image of the Indians too is of a transient population. This gets amply reflected in the literary writings of the Indian scholars. Whatever be the reasons for this emic and etic imagery, it helped Indians to consolidate their identity as the East Indians, notwithstanding the internal fissures, factions and disagreements.

In the political arena, after the First World War the attitude of the Indians and people of African origin changed towards the European population. There was a rising consciousness towards self-rule. Politics is all about striving for political gains and therefore in the process the political leaders exploited all kinds of cleavages. In the plantation societies of the Caribbean, ethnic identity was a ready-made cleavage, which of course was fully exploited by the political leaders. The colonial rulers, as could be expected, pursued the well-known policy of divide and rule. However, in spite of this, the various islands in the Caribbean became independent in course of time but ethnic cleavages have remained a part of political discourse. Independent nations have been formed with some sort of democracy in which adult franchise and regular elections are the common features. Indians participate in these elections, aligning themselves to one or the other parties. By and large, it can be safely stated that wherever Indian presence is there, they have not taken any extreme position either in terms of ethnicity or mobilization on class lines. They tend to take a more centrist position but have remained an exclusive population in social, cultural and religious terms.

The score of islands and mainland from Mexico to Panama is popularly called the Caribbean. It is a vast area inhabited by people belonging to different ethnic groups and languages. In the past the Europeans dominated the region and the economy was based on plantation worked by cheap labour. After the slavery was abolished there was an intensive and desperate search for cheap labour. At that time, India had come under the British colonial domination. They devised the scheme of indentured labour. Indian labours were exported to the various colonies of the Caribbean. In course of time through hard work and perseverance Indians were able to stabilize not only their position but also helped the plantation economy to grow and flourish. Socially and culturally the Indians have been able to establish their identity and in each country of their habitat they play active role in political arena too.

7.8 Further Reading

Misra P.K. 1995. 'Cultural design in identity formation in Trinidad.' *The Eastern Anthropologist*, Vol.48 No.3.