Exhibition review

*Indo + Caribbean: The Creation of a Culture – An exhibition review of the great experiment of Indian indenture*

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**ABSTRACT**

The museum exhibition, *Indo + Caribbean: The Creation of a Culture*, which ran at the Museum of London Docklands, offers a captivating and insightful exploration of the rich heritage and diverse traditions of the Indo-Caribbean community. Through a combination of artefacts, personal miscellany, for example, jewellery, letters petitioning the government from planter Sir John Gladstone, contracts, shipping company records, postcards and papers from the Parliamentary Archives and artworks, the exhibition provides a decent, albeit not exhaustive, overview of the historical, cultural and social aspects of Indo-Caribbean identity.
As the curator of the Museum of London, Shehreen Lafaj, elaborates; ‘As we mark the 75th anniversary of Windrush this year, *Indo + Caribbean* is a chance to learn more about Britain’s colonial footprint and the diverse communities from the Caribbean that have enriched our city’. This statement reverberates across this captivating exhibition exploring the relationship between India, the Caribbean and Britain through the spotlighting of two significant episodes of migration history. The first being the history of Indian indentureship to the British Caribbean (which took place from 1838 to 1917), and the post-war migration of Caribbeans to the UK between 1948 and 1971.

To coincide with the 75th anniversary celebrations of the arrival of Empire Windrush in the UK, which saw Caribbeans invited to Britain to help re-build the country as a result of the post-World War II labour shortages to work in the transport system, factories and the newly created National Health Service (NHS), the Museum of London Docklands added the captivating free display *Indo + Caribbean: The Creation of a Culture* as part of its London, ‘Sugar and Slavery’ gallery which ran from May to November 2023. Indian indenture in the Caribbean is a lesser-known and an even lesser-taught underrepresented aspect of British and South Asian history. The anthropologist Steven Vertovec (1993) emphasized the challenges that Indo-Caribbeans, from the islands with the largest Indian descent populations namely Trinidad and Guyana, faced in terms of recognition in fields such as civil service and faced economic discrimination and miscategorization, as grouped under ‘Black Caribbean’ or ‘South Asian’ which failed to capture their unique cultural and historical identity.

From the system and operationalization of indenture, how the British Empire recruited workers from India, as a cheap source of
labour, for their sugar plantations in the Caribbean, to the endur-
ing legacy of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora in shaping the cultural
landscape of London and beyond, the complex picture of inden-
ture is one that is continually being layered.

The descendants of Indian indenture embarked on another
wave of labour migration, in the form of the 1949–1971 Windrush
migrations to the United Kingdom. The Windrush generation
had a high number of Indo-Caribbean and Chinese-Caribbean
migrants that made this journey, but their stories rarely get told in
the wider Windrush narrative. The ‘minority within a minority’
(Kaladeen and Dabydeen, 2021) as they are described by scholars
as occupying a marginal positionality.

The Windrush generation became a byword for the first genera-
tion of Caribbean migrants and while their cultural legacy is
cemented throughout the British social landscape, this exhibition
underscores the undersung story of Indo-Caribbeans in the
Windrush journey. As there was no Indo-Caribbean option on the
census at the time, an accurate picture of the number of people
who made that journey is indeterminable and this dearth of acces-
sible records, as well as inattention on the topic in British classrooms
possibly because it interferes with the Empire narrative of triumph,
could to a large extent be posited as one of the reasons for the
underrepresentation. On another level, this group, conceptualized
by Maria Kaladeen and David Dabydeen (2021:1), the ‘minority
within a minority’, while occupying a marginal position in the
Windrush story, are finding expression in relatively new areas of
scholarly study and across a range of disciplines, for example, his-
tory, sociology, anthropology, and more recently forming a part of
a wider debate in the UK around decolonizing history.

Circling back to the exhibition display, this takes the observer
through a broadly chronological journey, albeit not a linear one,
between enslaved African labour and the start of Indian indenture
following the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 through which the British
Empire in the Caribbean, in search of cheap labour; recruited a large
number of workers from India to work on their sugar plantations. It opens with a note on the use of the term ‘coolie’ which it states is “generally considered an offensive term and should not be used. It is included in this display out of necessity on certain occasions, such as when it appears in historical documents and in academic writing.” There was a missed opportunity here to critically interrogate what was a labour-based racial slur for Indians in the Caribbean and drawing a connection to the contemporary usage of the term which is used freely and humorously in popular speech by North American diasporic Indo-Caribbeans and has been up for academic scrutiny in various ways, almost as an act of reclamation.

It highlights the first phase of Indian migration or the ‘old’ diaspora of Indian indentured labourers (Mishra 1996), their journey across the kala pani (literally meaning the dark waters) (Mehta, 2004), and life in the Caribbean for indentured labourers. The segmenting of sections, ‘Plantations and Policy’ (which explored the transition between enslaved African labour and the start of Indian indenture), ‘Voyages and Violence (which explored the sexual violence encountered by women on the treacherous ship voyages)’, ‘Sugarcane and Survival’ (which looked at the conditions faced by Indian migrants), ‘Culture and Community’ (which draws on stories of the Indo-Caribbean community in London), shines a light on various aspects of the indenture experience. It then moves to the second wave of migration of Indo-Caribbeans to Britain and their present-day lives and we see a personal account and oral history of a group of young women who are descendants of the Indo-Caribbeans on Windrush and who speak movingly about their grapple with identity, culture and sitting on the periphery of South Asian culture in London.

There was also certainly more scope to display a wider range of Indo-Caribbean voices, especially when compared to the ‘Sugar and Slavery’ section that ran alongside the much smaller display on Indo-Caribbean culture. In addition to that, the stories of resistance from within and labour resistance against indenture-ship was markedly absent. Stories of anti-colonial resistance which
impacted policy-making processes of the British Imperial Government have so far been neglected in scholarly fields and this also signals a lacuna in the representation of the Indian indenture experience in all its multifaceted details.

Looking ahead, one hopes museums will make a continued and concerted effort to support distinctive Indian Caribbean voices and culture as part of the wider call to be more inclusive and decolonized by exploring a wide range of ideas, mediums and perspectives. This would certainly go a long way in addressing the historical and contemporary silence around this history. A corrective we are seeing being addressed more meaningfully across social media where descendants of the indentured labour system are creating and contributing to a digital archive of Indo-Caribbean identity through alternate lenses, and in a digital environment which does not reinforce well-worn dichotomies of the ancestral homeland and the present homeland, but instead centres a space of creativity and agency. As the exhibition says in its closing panel, ‘With research on the subject growing and new archival sources being discovered, Indo-Caribbean history will be understood and told in new ways for generations to come’.

REFERENCES

Kaladeen, Maria del Pilar and David Dabydeen (eds.). 2021. The Other Windrush Legacies of Indenture in Britain’s Caribbean Empire (London: Pluto Press).

