

Indian Indentured Labourers in Trinidad also Cultivated Cocoa

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Anthropologist, author and University of Guyana lecturer Dr. Kumar Mahabir recently presented a research paper at the University of Fiji on cocoa cultivation by indentured Indians in Trinidad. The paper entitled “Recovering and reclaiming the lost history of Indian indentured labour in cocoa plantations in Trinidad in the Caribbean” was presented online at the international conference on “Celebrating Giritiya Lives: Documenting, Researching, Writing, and Communicating the Histories and Lives of Giritiyas”. It was held at The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji from May 12-13, 2023. The conference was organised by the Global Girit Institute, and The University of the South Pacific.

The following is his abstract: From the mid-1880s, the Caribbean island of Trinidad witnessed a significant decline in sugar prices, leading to an economic depression in the sugar industry and a consequent shift towards cocoa cultivation. This transition was instrumental in making cocoa the dominant crop, experiencing a boom from 1866 to 1920. Cocoa replaced sugar as the leading agricultural commodity when the sugar industry went into depression in the 1880s. Indian indentured labourers (giritiyas) (1845-1920) played a pivotal role in the development of the cocoa industry in Trinidad, representing a significant but unknown chapter in the country's history.

Although most indentured Indians in Trinidad and the wider Caribbean worked on sugar plantations, some of them were also recruited to work on cocoa estates. Many of these labourers had prior experience in agriculture and plantation work in their Indian homeland, which made them well-suited for the complex and demanding process of cocoa cultivation and production. After fulfilling their contracts, a fair number of them continued to work on cocoa estates, with some even later becoming contractors and small proprietors themselves. By 1891, an estimated 500 "time-expired" (contract-free) Indians owned small cocoa estates, while a few owned substantial holdings.

Today, some descendants of these indentured Indian labourers continue to live and work on the remaining cocoa estates. However, despite their significant contributions, their role in the cultivation of cocoa is not widely known. Therefore, it is essential to conduct research, document, speak about, and communicate the hidden aspects of their histories and experiences to expand our understanding of Indian indentureship and the history of the Caribbean. This paper/ presentation aims to discover, recover, claim and highlight this aspect of our lost giritiya history.

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