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Q13

Why indentured labour was taken by the British from India to their colonies? have they been able to preserve their cultural identity over there?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2018 · GS I · 15 marks · Modern Indian History

Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present - significant events, personalities, issues.

Core demand of the question

- Explain why the British took indentured labour from India to their colonies
- Then answer whether those communities have preserved cultural identity there

Revision summary

Indenture filled the labour hole left by the abolition of slavery in British plantation colonies.

Poverty and recruiters in the Bhojpuri and southern belts supplied girmitiyas through Calcutta and Madras.

Sugar colonies from Mauritius to Fiji and Natal were the main destinations.

Ramayana, festivals, temples, and Indian-derived speech preserved identity.

That identity is creolised and national in the host country, not an unchanged Indian village.

Introduction

After the abolition of slavery in the 1830s, British sugar and plantation colonies needed a cheap, tied labour force. India, under colonial poverty and recruitment networks, supplied girmitiyas to Mauritius, the Caribbean, Natal, Fiji, and elsewhere. Those communities kept a recognisable Indian cultural core, even as they creolised language, food, and faith.

Body

Why indentured labour was taken from India

- The **Slavery Abolition Act, 1833**, ended legal slavery in most British colonies; planters still wanted field gangs for sugar, tea, rice, and later rubber.
- India had a large rural surplus, famine years, and caste and land pressure in Bhojpuri, Tamil, Telugu, and eastern UP-Bihar belts, so recruiters could sign people to five-year indentures.
- Calcutta and Madras depots, the so-called arkati system, and later kangani in some Asian colonies channelled workers under colonial emigration rules such as the **Indian Emigration Act** tradition of the nineteenth century.
- Planters preferred Indian labour as cheaper than free European work and more controllable than fully free local labour, with the ship and the plantation hospital as tools of discipline.
- Destinations included Mauritius (from 1834), British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Natal, Fiji, and parts of East Africa and the Malay world, matching the map of British tropical produce.

- Indenture was sold as a contract with wages and return passage; in practice debt, violence, and the plantation clock made it a new bondage, which nationalist critics later called a second slavery.

Have they preserved cultural identity?

- **Yes, in a strong but changed form:** Ramayana recitation, Diwali, Muharram in some Caribbean towns, Tamil Thai Pongal, and village caste memory travelled in trunks and in oral epic.
- Bhojpuri, Tamil, and Hindi-derived creoles, plus temple and mosque building from the late nineteenth century, kept a distinct Indian public face in Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, and Fiji.
- Food (roti, dhal, curry plants), jewellery, and marriage rules mixed with Creole and African neighbours, so identity is Indian-descended, not a frozen 1850 village.
- **Gandhi's** Natal years and later diaspora politics show that legal racial hierarchy pushed groups to name themselves as Indians even while they became Mauritian or Trinidadian citizens.
- **Loss also happened:** many lost exact jati and village, and Christian missions and plantation time cut some ritual. Preservation is therefore cultural continuity with creolisation, not purity.

Way forward for the answer

- Give the post-slavery plantation cause first, then a clear yes on identity with examples of festival, language, and temple, plus the creole limit.

Flow diagram

Slavery abolished -> Plantation labour gap
 Plantation labour gap -> Indian indenture girmit
 Indian indenture girmit -> Mauritius Caribbean Natal Fiji
 Mauritius Caribbean Natal Fiji -> Ramayana temple language food
 Ramayana temple language food -> Creole but Indian-descended identity

Conclusion

Britain took Indian indentured labour to replace slave gangs on sugar and other plantations with a cheap, legally tied workforce from a colonised countryside. Those communities have preserved a living Indian cultural identity through epic, festival, language, and worship, while becoming local citizens with mixed, creole forms of that culture.

Facts & figures

Slavery Abolition Act, 1833

British statute that ended legal slavery in most colonies and created the planter demand for indenture.

Girmitiya

Name from 'agreement' used for Indian indentured workers, especially in Fiji and related memories.

Mauritius, 1834 onward

Early and large destination for Indian plantation labour after abolition.

Kangani system

Overseer-led recruitment used in some Asian plantation zones, alongside depot indenture.

End of indenture

Indian indenture was wound down around 1917-1920 after nationalist and official criticism.

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