

Reflections on Curating Indian Indenture

In 2023, the temporary exhibition '*Indo + Caribbean: The creation of a culture*' opened at London Museum Docklands, coinciding with Windrush 75 celebrations.¹ It was billed as one of the first major displays on Indian indenture in the UK and was my first experience in a Lead Curator role. 2023 also saw a number of exhibitions and projects on Indian indenture occur in the Netherlands. This was in response to the anniversary of Dutch abolition and Indian arrival in Suriname in 1873. Oftentimes, this was also the first time the institution had covered Indian indenture in a substantial way.

It struck me that a period of development is occurring with this topic within the heritage sphere. Curators, and project leads more generally, are increasingly being asked to share Indian indenture with the world. Museums themselves are doing work on this topic for the first time. And the public is slowly developing an awareness of this history.

What follows are some reflections on curating Indian indenture to help make this period of growth smoother and more successful. They were gleaned from the rare opportunity to spend two months in Amsterdam, learning the history from another side and speaking with others who have shared it, as I honed ideas for my future curatorial practice.

1. Kala Pani

The 'dark waters' crossed during the global Indian indenture system.

One of the most interesting discoveries from meeting with others who had curated Indian indenture was that the same issues present in the UK were also present in the Netherlands. To name a few:

- a. A lack of understanding within institutions of what Indian indenture is, leading to inadequate support for projects.
- b. Confusion around objects. The idea that many museums will not have anything related to Indian indenture in their collections or anything appropriate for display.
- c. A distinct lack of evaluation and data from previous Indian indenture projects to learn from.

In considering how to tackle these issues and more, taking an international perspective provided great insight. For example, I shared audience feedback from *Indo + Caribbean* and gathered some statistics, but also very useful qualitative feedback, from Dutch exhibitions. This allowed me to build a bigger and more useful picture of Indian indenture project results than a UK focus would have allowed. Through learning more about the Dutch and Surinamese experiences of indenture as well as how they commemorate the system, it became clear that facilitating fair global relationships where material can be shared is key. This can apply to object loans but also gaining insight into the myriad ways this history is

¹ Anniversary of the beginning of the arrival of roughly 500,000 Caribbean migrants to Britain during the period 1948-1973. They were invited to Britain, under the British Nationality Act of 1948, to help rebuild the country after the Second World War.

shared worldwide and enabling research that can improve our understanding of our own collections. Going forward, a wider international effort to bring more awareness to Indian indenture will only improve sector understanding and, with this, the support that Indian indenture projects receive. An international network would be a positive step forward.

2. Lalla Rookh

The first Indian indenture ship to arrive in Suriname in 1873.

I saw the name Lalla Rookh on the streets often in Amsterdam - usually it was some kind of Surinamese food establishment. I soon learned however that this physical presence did not translate to a strong public awareness of the Lalla Rookh or of Indian indenture history more widely. If you'll allow me, it seemed a metaphor. Indian indenture history has literally shaped our streets, from the past to the present, but we walk on by.

For reference, the Indo-Surinamese population is roughly 150,000 in the Netherlands, and Suriname is considered a 'traditional country of origin.'² The size of the Indo-Caribbean population in the UK is unknown but largely has its roots in the Windrush migration of roughly 500,000 Commonwealth citizens to Britain. Neither country includes Indian indenture as a substantial or compulsory part of their education system, although it is touched upon as part of the GCSE and Canon van Nederland curriculums.

I consider it important to highlight presence rather than lack when sharing Indian indenture with the public: the Lalla Rookh restaurants, the communities around us today, the fact that Indian indenture is essential for understanding British and Dutch colonial history and legacies. This is in opposition to the angle often taken of 'hidden history' and 'underrepresented history'. Whilst these labels have truth, and I myself have used them before, they play down the centrality of Indian indenture for understanding the modern world. They also encourage in visitors an emotional experience of benign curiosity at this niche topic, usually followed by forgetting, or shame for having not previously been aware. A better experience to facilitate might be the excitement of finally understanding something that is all around us – *so this is the story of my friend's heritage, what my Lalla Rookh takeaway represents, or even I knew empire did not end after abolition but was not sure what happened after*. I have seen first-hand the joy that visitors can feel from having these realisations facilitated.

Museums covering the topic of Indian indenture yet sidelining it demonstrate an innate misunderstanding of the history. Indian indenture connects to multiple aspects of modern society – from the food we eat via sugar production, to the legal systems we operate within, international relationships, developments in language, religion and more. It is easy and necessary to incorporate it into the wider, permanent stories museums tell such as by

² Statistics Netherlands (18/03/2022 15:00). *New classification of population by origin Replacing classification based on migration background and the concepts western/non-western*. Available at: <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/longread/statistische-trends/2022/new-classification-of-population-by-origin> (Accessed: 20th July 2025).

adding it to timelines, permanent displays, and object labelling. This must be a commitment from museums as this history becomes more prominent.

3. Elisabeth Moendi

An Indian indentured labourer in Suriname, brought to Amsterdam for display.

I visited various exhibitions and archives in the Netherlands and saw Elisabeth Moendi's image multiple times. It encouraged me to consider the objects we can and should use when sharing Indian indenture history. Elisabeth Moendi was an Indian woman brought to Suriname on an indenture contract. She was later exhibited in Amsterdam as part of a human zoo at the Colonial Trade and Exports Exhibition in 1883. Showcasing her image, taken in 1883, begs the question – do we inflict further damage by putting her on show again? This question can be applied to many a colonial era photograph.

The answer is not an obvious one and I have been impressed by the repeated examples of museums contextualising such images and encouraging viewers to consider their colonial origins. Some also argue that the images have not completely stripped their subjects of agency. Ananya Jahanara Kabir highlights Elisabeth Moendi's gaze – implying a form of conversation that occurs when they lock eyes.³ In this way she suggests that Elisabeth's gaze gives her a voice.

If voice is what we need when showcasing this challenging history there are many sources for this with Indian indenture. Whether that be songs, stories passed down through communities, writings of the indentured like that of Munshi Rahman Khan or the Calcutta letters, and even conspicuous silences. I have a particular passion for encouraging the use of language as an 'object' worthy of display in museums. Indenture was a system built in many ways on words - built on promises made across languages at a time when your word arguably meant more than it does today. Language can be used as an object even in Elisabeth Moendi's case – her name alone holds within it stories of cross-cultural collisions. Perhaps her name alone is worthy of display.

Elisabeth also makes me think about space. Her picture was on show at the Rijksmuseum, which is right next to Museumplein where she was exhibited in 1883. Knowing this as you are in that space would likely be a powerful experience. At London Museum Docklands, we displayed a picture of the indenture ship the Chenab docked right outside where the visitor was standing. We then built on this with an accompanying audio piece about the experience on the ships and the original log book that recorded its journeys. Allowing visitors to feel the presence of a space, maximising the levels on which they are encouraged to place themselves in another time, is one of the major benefits of museums that should be utilised as it allows visitors to gain understanding on a level beyond the intellectual. This is necessary when sharing Indian indenture history which is in so many ways about personal lived experiences.

³ Kabir, A. J. (2024) 'The Dutch in India, India and the Dutch: An Entangled Inheritance', in Flores, W and Modest, W (eds.) *Our Colonial Inheritance*. Lannoo Publishers, pp.32-47.

4. Hindustani:

A name for the Indo-Surinamese community, used both in Suriname and in the Netherlands.

Brij Lal wrote *'The establishment of the academic study of Indentureship is a relatively recent development that has been led by descendants of indentured labourers from across the diaspora.'*⁴ I would extend that to the heritage sphere, where descendants of indentured labourers have been doing incredible work uncovering this history and sharing it with the public. Having met community members in the UK and the Netherlands and seen the work of places like The Ameena Gafoor Institute and Sarnamihuis, I have seen research done that has moved forward indenture studies by miles and immense creativity in sharing this. Why should these communities work with museums when they do such fantastic work themselves? Maybe they should not. But those who have done so often raise the valid point of the increased visibility that museums can offer.

If museums work with communities it should be positive and more needs to be done on this front. Many community members I spoke with had negative experiences or just average ones. I will not go into detail here about how to do good community work. In many ways it is pretty obvious, although I am learning not so obvious as we would hope so a miniscule rundown of basics here: fair payment, respect for community expertise, anti-racist practice.

I do want to deep dive a bit though into an unexpected learning from this fellowship – the need to bring more focus to the emotional experience of curating Indian indenture. One of the most surprising aspects of my time in Amsterdam was how emotional many of the conversations I had were. When speaking with community members and curators alike there was a shared understanding of the harsh toll of working within museums to share Indian indenture history. I have identified below some of the key sentiments that cropped up. All of the below can be felt by both community partners and museum staff working on such projects.

Trauma –

The pain of dealing with histories that include violence, abuse, sexism, racism, manipulation and more. Having to learn about these horrors and then carry on to meet deadlines.

Can we allow for time and support so that people experiencing this can adequately process?

Guilt–

I do not know enough. Why do I have this opportunity and not others?

I hope it is encouraging to know that in my experience good intentions and hard work to share this history have always been appreciated.

Anger –

Particularly when experiencing a lack of support from institutions.

⁴ Lal, Brij V. "Indian Indenture: History and Historiography in a Nutshell." *Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies* 1, no. 1 (2021): 1–15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/jofstudindentleg.1.1.0001>.

Avenues for expressing discontent and reaching resolutions should be available and not just at the end of the process.

Burnout –

Dealing with the relentless pressure of deadlines often whilst under-resourced. This is particularly common with Indian indenture projects which are often temporary and on smaller budgets.

As discussed in this article, Indian indenture projects need proper support and funding.

If I can encourage one thing in the process of curating Indian indenture it would be to account for and prioritise the emotional experience at the beginning of any project. This includes providing resource for emotional support and checking in during the process rather than simply after. Even later acknowledgement of the emotional experience has been powerful for me.

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