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Jaishankar's Caribbean Tour: Girmitiya Roots, CARICOM Reach

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HISTORY & CULTURE

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Jaishankar's Caribbean Tour: Girmitiya Roots, CARICOM Reach

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WHY IN NEWS

External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar concluded his three-nation Caribbean tour on **May 10, 2026**, having visited **Jamaica, Suriname, and Trinidad & Tobago**. The visit included the 9th India-Suriname Joint Commission Meeting in Paramaribo and a symbolic stop at Nelson Island in Trinidad with PM Kamla Persad-Bissessar, marking the 1845 arrival of indentured Indian labourers.

THE ITINERARY

COUNTRY	DATES	KEY ENGAGEMENTS
Jamaica	May 5-6, 2026	Bilateral meetings; Indian-origin community engagement
Suriname	May 6-7, 2026	9th India-Suriname Joint Commission Meeting, Paramaribo
Trinidad & Tobago	May 8-10, 2026	Nelson Island visit with PM Persad-Bissessar; deliverables ceremony

The Caribbean leg followed the EAM's broader Latin America-Caribbean engagement track, building on PM Modi's earlier Guyana visit (November 2024) when he addressed the 2nd India-CARICOM Summit.

THE SURINAME ROADMAP

The **9th India-Suriname Joint Commission Meeting (JCM)** held in **Paramaribo (May 6-7, 2026)** produced a six-point partnership roadmap:

PILLAR	FOCUS
People-to-people	Diaspora, OCI, education, scholarships
Development	Capacity-building, ITEC, e-VBAB tele-medicine
Defence	Training, capacity-building, joint exercises
Project delivery	Time-bound execution of Indian-funded projects
Trade and tourism	Rupee-denominated trade; visa facilitation
Digital and AI	UPI, DPI export, AI partnerships

Suriname – Why It Matters

- **27% of Suriname’s population is of Indian origin** (descendants of indentured labourers transported 1873-1916)
- Hindi-derived **Sarnami** is widely spoken
- President Chan Santokhi is of Indian origin
- Strategic location on the Caribbean-South American interface (CARICOM member; also borders Brazil)
- Oil & gas potential (offshore discoveries) – a long-term energy partnership opportunity

NELSON ISLAND AND THE GIRMITIYA STORY

PM Persad-Bissessar accompanied EAM Jaishankar to **Nelson Island, Trinidad and Tobago** – the immigration depot where **Indian indentured labourers first landed in 1845** aboard the *Fatel Razack*.

The Girmitiya System

- “Girmitiya” derives from the “**Agreement**” (English) -> *girmit* (mispronunciation) signed by labourers
- Indentured Indian labour was exported by the **British and Dutch colonial powers from 1834 to 1917** to replace freed African slaves on plantations
- Major destinations: Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, South Africa, Jamaica, Reunion
- The Government of India officially **abolished indentured labour exports in 1917** after sustained agitation by leaders including **Mahatma Gandhi** and **Gopal Krishna Gokhale**
- Today, an estimated **15+ million descendants of Girmitiyas** form a vibrant overseas Indian community

Cultural Continuity

- Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Hindi-derived creoles survive (Sarnami in Suriname, Trinidadian Bhojpuri, Fiji Hindi)
- Festivals: Holi (Phagwah), Diwali (Divali), Eid celebrated as public holidays in many host states
- The annual **Pravasi Bharatiya Divas**, observed since 2003 on January 9, commemorates Gandhi's return from South Africa in 1915 (historical context)

DELIVERABLES HANDED OVER

During the Trinidad & Tobago leg, India formally handed over:

- **Made-in-India laptops** for school distribution
- An **agro-processing facility** to boost local value-add in food processing
- A **Prosthetics Centre** to expand assistive-device access

These line up with India's "development partnership" model – demand-driven, human-resource-focused assistance.

CARICOM – THE MULTILATERAL FRAME

PARAMETER	DETAIL
Full name	Caribbean Community
Established	1973 (Treaty of Chaguaramas)
Members	15 member states + 5 associate members
Headquarters	Georgetown, Guyana
Key bodies	CARICOM Secretariat, CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME), Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ)

India-CARICOM Format

- **1st India-CARICOM Summit:** September 2019, New York (on UNGA margins) – PM Modi
- **2nd India-CARICOM Summit:** November 2024, Guyana – PM Modi
- **7 pillars of cooperation** announced at Guyana: Capacity building, Agriculture/Food security, Renewable energy, Innovation/Technology, Cricket/Culture, Ocean economy, Medicine/Healthcare

WHY THE CARIBBEAN MATTERS FOR INDIA

- 1 **Diaspora ties:** ~1.5 million Indian-origin population in CARICOM nations
- 2 **Voting bloc:** CARICOM nations vote together at UN and OAS – influential on UNSC reform, climate, oceans
- 3 **Oil & critical minerals:** Guyana (oil bonanza since 2019), Suriname (offshore oil), Jamaica (bauxite)
- 4 **China counter:** China has stepped up Caribbean infrastructure financing – India’s qualitative engagement counters this
- 5 **Climate vulnerability:** Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are leading climate voices; India shares interests on adaptation finance

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2 – International Relations

- India-CARICOM relations; CARICOM structure
- Diaspora policy (PBD, OCI, Pravasi Bharatiya Samman)
- Latin America-Caribbean strategy
- Indo-Pacific to Indo-Atlantic-Caribbean continuum

GS Paper 1 – Modern Indian History

- Indentured labour (Girmitiya) system, 1834-1917
- Gandhi’s South Africa years; opposition to indenture
- Indian diaspora and cultural retention

Mains Angles

- 1 Trace the evolution of the Indian diaspora through the Girmitiya migrations and assess its contemporary diplomatic significance.
- 2 Discuss India’s engagement with CARICOM and its role in India’s Global South strategy.
- 3 How does cultural diplomacy complement India’s economic engagement with the Caribbean?

FACTS CORNER – KNOWLEDGEEDIA
EAM CARIBBEAN TOUR (MAY 5-10, 2026):

Jamaica (May 5-6); Suriname (May 6-7); Trinidad & Tobago (May 8-10)

9th India-Suriname JCM, Paramaribo

Nelson Island visit (T&T) – 1845 Girmitya landing site

Six-point Suriname roadmap (people-to-people, development, defence, project delivery, trade & tourism, digital/AI)

GIRMITIYAS:

Indentured Indian labour, 1834-1917

Destinations: Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, South Africa, Jamaica, Reunion

First T&T landing: 1845 aboard *Fatel Razack*

Suriname landings: 1873-1916

Abolition: 1917 (Indian Government, after Gandhi, Gokhale agitation)

CARICOM:

Founded 1973 (Treaty of Chaguaramas)

HQ: Georgetown, Guyana

15 member states; 5 associate members

India-CARICOM Summits: 1st 2019 New York; 2nd 2024 Guyana

PM OF TRINIDAD & TOBAGO: KAMLA PERSAD-BISSESSAR (OF INDIAN ORIGIN).
PRESIDENT OF SURINAME: CHAN SANTOKHI (OF INDIAN ORIGIN).

PRAVASI BHARATIYA DIVAS: OBSERVED SINCE 2003 ANNUALLY ON JANUARY 9 – COMMEMORATES GANDHI'S RETURN FROM SOUTH AFRICA (1915).

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