

## Cultural Legacy of Girmitiyas in Mauritius

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### Abstract

After the abolition of slavery system in Europe, a new system was developed in the form of new experiment to fulfill the demand of labourers in sugar colonies. In the year 1834 to 1920 around 20 million people were transported from India to different sugar colonies in the form of indentured labourers to fulfill the demand of their different needs. In the same process Mauritius received a sizable number of people from India, who settled there. This was done on a contract of 5 years but most of the people choose to settle at their deported countries. They started their normal life through preservation and conservation of their native cultures which were brought with themselves. Mauritius was the first country which received indentured labourers from India. Mauritius has become an unique example of preservation of cultures by indentured labourers. They still believe that they will be brought back by lord Hanumana as it was happened in Ramayana. There is Ganga talaab in Mauritius which is in the memory of holy river Ganga from India. These are the few examples from many which shows that how they have conserved their cultures even sometimes better than their native country. Many organisations have played a pivotal role in the preservation of cultures especially by Arya Samaj in Mauritius. At evening, after working the whole day they sat together and started singing their folk songs with jhal, manzira, tabla, dholak etc, in this way they celebrated their cultures from reaching to till now. They are Keen to preserve and conserve their cultures with the help of many organisations who are devoted for this work. My paper will analysis the details of contributions of such organisations especially by Arya Samaj in Mauritius.

### Keywords

Migration, cultural legacy, girmitiyas, indentureship, slavery act, voyage, colonies, long journey etc.

### Aims of the study

This research paper aims to find out about the rich cultural legacy in Mauritius which was established by girmitiyas which were migrated from India. This paper will also trace out the ancestral roots of girmitiyas connected to their parentland India. This paper will also review the whole journey process which was full of pain and strife starting from various depots to Mauritius. This research will find out about the connection between cultural practices in Mauritius with Indian cultural practices.

### Methodology of the study

This research paper will use the methods of case study, survey method followed by document analysis, archives visit etc. The researcher will use the qualitative method for reaching its conclusion.

### Introduction

Human beings have long traditions of migration from ancient period to till now. According to anthropology, humans have evolved in the African continent and later on the dispersed and settled in the other parts of the world. Cultures have played a significant role in the shaping of human life from evolution to present time. And this migration has also causes the migration of cultures also. This migration of culture has enriched the human life from all parts. Such type of migration was also occurring in the 19th century to deport indentured labourers from India to sugar colonies.<sup>1</sup> Mauritius was the first country to receive such type of labourers from India. From the period of 1834 to 1920 millions of people migrated in the search of job from India to Mauritius and they settled there. They have taken many things with them while migrating from India and culture was at the top. Although there was contract only for 5 years for

<sup>1</sup> Kumar, A. (2017). Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830–1920. .  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316556627>.

returning but most of the people due to many reasons decided to settle in Mauritius.<sup>2</sup> Now a days they are accounting a significant number of population in the Mauritius but most of the thing is that they are highly active in the political, social and economic life of Mauritius especially in the context of preserving their native culture.<sup>3</sup>

Indentured labourers were recruited through an agreement and later on it is known as *girmitiya* with the effect of Bhojpuri dialect. This agreement was done for a term of 5 years and there was provision for return back but most of the indentured labourers decided to settle there.<sup>4</sup> Recruitment was done through various methods and they have to assemble at Calcutta port for further deportation. Their assembling at depot created a new type of culture which was intermingling and later on assimilated by *Girmitiyas*. They have to travel for a longer distance and for long time and due to this a new term developed for calling each other and that was known as *Jahāji Bhai*.<sup>4</sup> This ship became house for the period of 3 to 6 months and they have to develop a new type of life on the ship for survival. This journey through ship was very miserable because the conditions for survival on the ship was very hard and difficult due to many reasons.<sup>5</sup> Their songs at ship sung by them depicts the hardness and difficult life at ship. Later on many songs were sung by people showing the difficult time at ship and how they were going away from their family like *Paltaniyā ke Jahāj*.<sup>6</sup>

There were a special bonding on the ship due to long journey and distance and they call *Jahāji Bhai* for each other on the ship.<sup>7</sup> During recruitment process, special attention was on the ratio between male and female due to many reasons. Maintaining of this ratio benefitted recruiters a lot on the plantation field and this ratio decided to stay permanently and settled in the sugar colonies.<sup>8</sup> There were people from many caste and it also created a new society in the sugar colony which reflects the society like in India on the basis of caste system. So, rituals and performance were according to caste structure as it was happening in India, so we can say that in the sugar colony they were doing the same like in India in the context of their culture and rituals.<sup>9</sup> They were going in the unknown place so their cultures played a significant role in many ways living their life during the journey and in the sugar colony also.<sup>10</sup> The journey from India to different destinations witnessed many tragedies especially during the journey on the ships. Those who fell sick on the ship were thrown out of the ship to prevent contagious disease spreading to other inmates at the ships and there is no actual numbers how many people faced such type of cruelty who lost their lives. Lastly, they reached their destinations which were unknown for them. During this painful journey they were bound by cultural tenets carried by them coming from India. Their cultural legacy supported to survive at ships and after especially during the odd hours while long journey from India to Mauritius. They reached finally Mauritius stepping up 16 stairs and nowadays it is known as *Apravāsi Ghāt* which is included in the World Heritage site list.<sup>11</sup>

In Mauritius and other colonial countries indentured labourers were kept in Coolie lines separate from the European masters to differentiate between Indians and Europeans.<sup>12</sup> They had to work whole day to fulfill the target set by their masters in the sugarcane fields. At the end of the day they get exhausted working hard whole day in the fields and in the evening and night they sat together to recall the past memories especially associated with their Indian cultures. Indian Indentured labours started singing their traditional songs sitting together in the form of *Bhajan*,

<sup>2</sup> Mahase, Radica, (2021). Why Should we be Called 'Coolies'?: The End of Indian Indentured Labour, Routledge Tylor & Francis Group, London and New York. Pp.11

<sup>3</sup> Eisenlohr, Patrick, (2007) Little india: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius, University of California Press.

<sup>4</sup> Lal, B. (2021). Indian indenture: History and historiography in a nutshell. *Journal of Indentureship and its Legacies*. pp. 06 <https://doi.org/10.13169/jofstudindentleg.1.1.0001>.

<sup>5</sup> Look Lai, W. (1989). The indentured ship voyage as a site of cultural transformation. *Caribbean Quarterly*, 35(3/4), 40–57.

<sup>6</sup> Lal, B. V. (1983). *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians*. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 18(3), 157–176

<sup>7</sup> Lal, B. V. (1983). *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians*. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 18(3), 157–176.

<sup>8</sup> Kale, M. (1998). *Fragments of empire: Capital, slavery, and Indian indentured labor migration in the British Caribbean*. University of Pennsylvania Press. pp. 110-118

<sup>9</sup> Jayawardena, C. (1968). Cultural and social aspects of Indian immigrant life in British Guiana. *Caribbean Studies*, 8(4), 19–33

<sup>10</sup> Lal, B. V. (1983). *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians*. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 18(3), 157–176.

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO. (2006). *Apravasi Ghat World Heritage Nomination Dossier*. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. pp. 25–30.

<sup>12</sup> Carter, 1995, pp. 152–158

*Keertan, Chaitā, Faguaa* etc. to get rid of their stress and pain from the whole day working in the sugarcane fields in the odd conditions.<sup>13</sup>

There was provision in the agreement for returning after completion of indentureship of 5 years, but most of the labourers decided to settle their due to many circumstances and other reasons.<sup>14</sup> After the abolition of new system of agreement in those countries people who have gone from India started purchasing land for their permanent settlement and this type of new setup created a new cultural regime in those countries. People from India started influencing culturally in the Mauritius and their dominance especially in the context of culture and related activities getting harder day by day.<sup>15</sup> Due to influence of Indian people Bhojpuri has been regarded a prominent language in Mauritius, daily news is also broadcasted in Bhojpuri language, people in Mauritius especially from India speak Bhojpuri to associate themselves with their ancestral land and cultural legacy brought with them from India.<sup>16</sup> Due to cultural associations from India government has bestowed many facilities to visit India especially in the form of OCI cards. They celebrate their festivals in the same manner and zeal as celebrated in India and sometimes at par comparing to Indian celebrations. People in Mauritius regard Mauritius as their motherland and they regard India as their fatherland due to cultural connections from India.<sup>17</sup> They are eager to discover their roots in India and they are trying to find it at any cost through their immigration pass. In India Ganga is regarded as holy river, in the same way and manner in Mauritius people from India have created a pond and they have named it as Ganga Talaab in the memory of holy Ganga in India.

## Conclusion

This research paper keeps the journey about the cultural legacy of girmityas in Mauritius how they have survived in the country which they were unknown before going there. Their stories elaborate the detail description and survival especially in the context of cultural how they were inclined towards the native culture even in the odd conditions in Mauritius. This paper has concluded that in Mauritius indentured labourers have built a great legacy of Indian culture. People in Mauritius are closely associated with Indians on the basis of their cultural legacy which have been brought from India during voyage. They tend to be Indian in the memory of cultural legacy. Researcher has come to the point that there is need of more bonding between India and Mauritius on the basis of their cultural exchange. Indian government should give more facilities to the citizens of Mauritius so that they can easily explore their culture and ancestral connection between India and Mauritius. There is need of more free movement between India and Mauritius to make their relationship more stronger. Government of India should make process easy for people of Mauritius to trace their ancestral roots easily. There is need of establishing more centres for focusing on the study of Mauritius and their related cultures so that students may know more about that country. Indian diaspora should be part of in the syllabus of University and college education. More scholarships should be provided to the interested students who wants to explore Indian culture in the Mauritius. More programs should be organised in the memory of indentured labourers who left our country long years ago and now they are at prominent positions in their motherland. The result of this research is enough fruitful establishing missing connections between India and Mauritius through the study of cultural legacy in Mauritius.

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<sup>13</sup> Vertovec, 1992, pp. 290–295.

<sup>14</sup> Tinker, 1974, pp. 218–223.

<sup>15</sup> Eriksen, 1998, pp. 45–52.

<sup>16</sup> Eisenlohr, 2006, pp. 63–72.

<sup>17</sup> Clarke et al., 1990, pp. 45–52.

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