

Maintaining identity in the Diaspora: Distinctiveness of the Indian Diaspora in Fiji and the Pacific

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To cite this article: Ali, Wahab, (2023), 'Maintaining identity in the Diaspora: Distinctiveness of the Indian Diaspora in Fiji and the Pacific', *Indenture Papers: Studies on Girmitiyas*, Vol. 3: 81-100. @ <https://girit.ac.fj/ip-2023-ali/>

Date Published: 4 December 2023

Other articles in this volume: <https://girit.ac.fj/current-issue/>

Editorial Board: <https://girit.ac.fj/editorial-board/>

Notes for Contributors: <https://girit.ac.fj/notes-for-contributors-2/>

Abstract

The Indian Diaspora is estimated to be the second largest in the world and covers countries like Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia, Surinam, and Guyana. Over time, people in many countries have assimilated with the native populations and have started emulating and practicing their traditions, customs and many of their cultural ethos and practices. The Indian diaspora in Fiji is quite unique in this relation as they have still managed to stick to their language, religion and most of their cultural activities. This paper examines the intricate mosaic of the complexities associated with the Indian diaspora and how they have been able to manage their uniqueness and identity despite alienation and host country variations. Findings reveal that formation of religious organizations contributed significantly towards the preservation and proliferation of their religious traditions and cultural practices. The foresightedness and the wisdom of the Girmitiyas in setting up of small village schools also greatly enhanced the protection and spread of their languages and religious teachings. The cultural values and traditions were so ingrained in the diaspora that even when they migrated from Fiji, the essence of the values and practices have prevailed and are still followed and cherished by them

Keywords: Diaspora, Girmitiyas, Indenture System, Heritage, Migration, Colony, Dispersion, Ancestors.

Introduction

Fiji is officially known as the Republic of Fiji and is located in the Melanesian part of the South Pacific Ocean. It lies about 2,000 km north-northeast of New Zealand and consists of an archipelago of more than 330 islands. Fiji was inhabited some 2,500 years ago with the arrival of the ancestors of the indigenous Fijians to Viti Levu. Dutch explorer Abel Tasman was the first known European visitor to Fiji who sighted the northern island of Vanua Levu and the North Taveuni archipelago in 1643. This was followed by the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1774 and Captain William Bligh in 1789 and later in 1792 (Gravelle, 2000). The first Europeans to maintain substantial contact with the Fijians were sandalwood merchants, whalers and *beche-de-mer* (sea cucumber) traders. Missionaries started arriving as trading continued. In 1820, the trading post, Levuka, on Ovalau, was established as the first European-style town in Fiji. Fiji became a British Colony on 10th October 1874 when Cakobau and some of the senior chiefs of Fiji signed two copies of the Deed of Cession in Levuka. In 1878 Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon became the Governor of Fiji and decided to bring indentured labourers from India to work on the sugarcane fields. At that time India was also a British Colony. The plan involved bringing Indian workers to Fiji on a five-year contract, after which they could return to India at their own expense (Prasad, 2015). However, they had the option of returning to India at the government's expense if they chose to renew their contract for a second five-year term or they could remain in Fiji. Thus, began the indenture system in Fiji.

The mass exodus of people from India and the formation of Indian Diaspora communities are mostly due to Britain, the colonial master. During 1879 - 1920 over 60,000 children, women and men came to Fiji under the indenture system to serve the British interests. The Diasporic consciousness manifests itself in a variety of ways that leads one to question his or hers very existence in this world. Furthermore, it leads to a sense of loss and alienation in a new place sprawled between one's inherent cultural milieu and the new location. The Indian indentured labourers who were brought to Fiji were mostly illiterate and unsuspecting of what the future held for them. The first ship Leonidas arrived in Fiji on Wednesday 14th May 1879 carrying 522 indentured labourers (Mishra, 2014). These were the first lot from the over 60,000 indentured labourers that arrived in the next 37 years. The ship rides to Fiji were not smooth as hundreds died at sea and whose bodies were disposed in the darkness of the nights without proper rites or rituals. It took three months by sail ship and about one month by steam ship to reach Fiji. Despite the hardship during this

period, a type of bonding occurred among the recruits who called each other *jahajibhai*, meaning shipmates (Lal, 2012). The new journeys formed many new bonds that lasted even after they landed ashore and were posted to serve their duties.

Background and Context

Upon reaching Fiji, the recruits were kept in quarantine on Nukulau Island before being allocated to the plantations (Ali, 1979; Lal, 2012). On the day of allocation, the recruits were formed into groups for plantation owners to transport them to their destinations. The largest number of Girmitiyas were allocated to the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company (CSR) that operated sugar mills and had its own sugarcane plantations. The Gimit period was not easy and cannot be fully captured and felt as it contains many hardships, tragedies and miseries imposed by the colonial masters. A report on Fiji prepared by Reverend John Andrews, an emissary of Mahatma Gandhi, examined suicide, and stated that the highest number of Girmitiyas committed suicide at dawn between 3 am and 4 am. The cause was likely the realization of another day of misery and hard labour under scorching sun. Prasad (2015) asserts that lack of women workforce led to other social problems leading to rape, polygamy and polyandry. Cases of polyandry were noted in many plantations, and women bore the brutishness of the Gimit system silently as they did not have any rights to justice. Being a British colony, some approximately 60,565 Indians arrived in Fiji, some as children and some born on ships. As the workers were generally illiterate, the system came to be known as 'Gimit' derived from the word 'agreement', and later the labourers came to be called 'Girmitiyas' (Lal, 2012).

Initially, the Girmitiyas were housed in a room 10 feet by 7 feet and later in 1908 the rooms were slightly extended to 10 feet by 12 feet, in a barrack of sixteen rooms, eight on each side (Ali, 1979). A room housed either three single persons or a married couple with not more than two children (Lal, 2012). The rooms had doors but there were no windows and sometimes no floors. The partitions did not reach the ceiling as there was instead a wire netting link for ventilation. The room was a store-house, kitchen, a living-room and bedroom as well as it served as a resting place where a labourers spent their time when not working outdoors (Ali, 1979). The Gimit contract clearly stipulated that an individual had to work nine hours on five consecutive days of every week, plus five hours on Saturday, and for each full day's work he would receive a shilling (Ali, 1979). The atrocities and indignities inflicted upon the Girmitiyas

were numerous, but they were ignored by the colonial authorities and planters. Gimit ended on January 1, 1920, which liberated the Girmitiyas from the shackles of slavery, sufferings and their hardships. It is not the intention of this paper to recount the tragedies and sufferings of Gimit, as most of what happened are now in the public domain.

For the Indian diaspora, Fiji is their home and for the Indo-Fijian diaspora who have migrated to other countries, Fiji is the place of their childhood memories and it is fondly remembered as a beautiful country offering a relaxed lifestyle. This paper examines how the Indian Diaspora in Fiji and the Indo-Fijian diaspora in New Zealand have been able to maintain their religious and cultural identities and celebrate their festivals in style. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How were the Girmitiyas in Fiji able to maintain their religious and cultural obligations over time?
2. How did the establishment of educational institutions assist in preserving one's religious teachings and culture?
3. How have the Indo-Fijian diaspora in other countries been able to maintain their religious and cultural obligations?

The above questions assisted in collecting rich qualitative data that addressed the research rationale.

A Note on Terminologies

After the promulgation of the 2013 constitution by the Fijian Government, all citizens of Fiji became known as Fijians. In this paper, Fijians of Indian descent who are the descendants of the Girmitiyas will be termed as Indo-Fijians while the natives of Fiji would be referred to as iTaukei or Indigenous Fijians. The term Fijian encompasses all the citizens of Fiji. To differentiate between the Indian diaspora in Fiji and those that have migrated from Fiji to other countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America, the term Indo-Fijian diaspora will be used. While the Indian diaspora has flourished and grown in Fiji, the Indo-Fijian diaspora in other countries have also grown in numbers and still follow their traditions and culture in comfort and style. The Indian diaspora in Fiji includes all those who were born in Fiji and treat Fiji as their motherland while the Indo-Fijian diaspora comprises those who have migrated from Fiji and regard their adopted countries as their homeland although they have strong ties with Fiji (Quanchi, 2005). The terminology is based on the theoretical concept of 'Exemplary Diaspora' that enables one to understand its cultural minority status and identify with its adopted country (Gautam, 2013). Carmen Voigt-Graf has also used the term Indo-Fijian

diaspora in her paper *Transnationalism and the Indo-Fijian Diaspora: The Relationship of Indo-Fijians to India and its People* to refer to the Indian diaspora that migrated from Fiji to Australia (Voigt-Graf, 2008).

Girmitiya Histography

About 60,945 individuals were brought in Fiji between 1879 and 1916 from India (Lal, 2012). Most of them were destined for the sugar cane plantations of the newly established British colony. Under the system, labourers were given a free passage to Fiji. They served under government protection as indentured agricultural labourers for five years with penal sanctions to enforce the contract, and were entitled to a free return passage after spending another five years in the colony (Gillion, 1962). According to Hundt (2014) people were from different castes and represented across-section, socially, of Indian agricultural society. After the end of the indenture system in 1916 many Indians remained in Fiji, farming the land they leased from the Fijians and calling Fiji their new home (Lal, 2012).

Fiji became independent in 1970, but a series of military coups starting in 1987 (with subsequent coups in 2000 and 2006) led to major political instability in the country. This, in turn, led to an exodus of Indo Fijians, mainly to New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States of America. According to Voigt-Graf (2008) Indo-Fijians are part of an Indian diaspora of over 20 million people spread across all corners of the globe. It is interesting to note that in the process of this migration, their relationship to India and to subcontinental Indians has changed. Indo-Fijians have created transnational spaces that are centred around Fiji and that largely exclude their ancestral homeland India (Voigt-Graf, 2008). For the Indo-Fijian diaspora regard themselves as Pacific Islanders and Fiji as their motherland and India as the land of their ancestors.

Research Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted for this study using telephone interviews (for diaspora) and semi-structured interviews for local people supported by meta-synthesis. Semi-structured interviews were held and member checking was done before the interviews were transcribed in verbatim. Telephone interviews are more expressive than email surveys, thus adding a personal touch and capturing more responses (Carr & Worth, 2001). Interviews were used because the stories of diaspora migrants can be best captured by oral narratives (Sen, 2012). In line with the views expressed by Fontana and Frey

(1994) all ethical procedures were followed and the participants have not been identified in order to maintain high level of confidentiality and anonymity. Local as well as international literature formed the basis for meta-synthesis. Meta-syntheses are best designed to re-interpret meaning across qualitative studies; it is an intentional and coherent approach to analyzing data across qualitative studies. This paper uses qualitative meta-synthesis as an innovative research approach in the field of diasporic studies.

For the purpose of this study, purposeful sampling strategy was implemented and 10 individuals were purposefully selected for the interviews from different religious organizations and the Indo-Fijian diaspora in New Zealand. The qualitative information was transformed into quantitative data where ever possible and analyzed using thematic approach (Creswell, 2014). Table 1 shows the interview participants.

Table 1: Interview Participants

Participant Number*	Organization	Individual	Community Leader
P1, 2023	Senior Citizen 1	√	
P2, 2023	Senior Citizen 2		√
P3, 2023	Senior Citizen 3	√	
P4, 2023	Senior Citizen 4		√
P5, 2023	Senior Citizen 5	√	
P6, 2023	Indo-Fijian diaspora in New Zealand	√	
P7, 2023	Indo-Fijian diaspora in New Zealand	√	
P8, 2023	Indo-Fijian diaspora in New Zealand	√	
P9, 2023	Indo-Fijian diaspora in New Zealand	√	
P10, 2023	Indo-Fijian diaspora in New Zealand	√	

*The P stands for participant and the digit represents the individual followed by the year.

Findings and Discussion

Fiji the Adopted Home

After the end of the Gimit period, people were given the choice either to stay back or return to India. While some had signed five-year contracts, others signed for another five years so that they could have a paid passage to India. Many just signed the five-year contract as they decided to stay back in Fiji to raise their families and do farming to support their livelihood (Gillion, 1962).

In the aftermath of Girit (1879-1919), a new diasporic subculture emerged in Fiji, which saw the girmitiyas continuing to practice the traditions of their Giritiya parents. The Girmitiyas had come largely from the United Provinces, while approximately 15 percent were from the south India (Lal, 2012). Two common dialects of the Indian subcontinent, Awadhi and Bhojpur, produced a distinct lingua franca, which came to be known as Fiji Hindi. Though it is a distortion of pure or shudh Hindi, it gained strength and influence and is spoken widely today, including by the descendants of those from South India. The latter also speak some Tamil and Telegu.

The Indo-Fijian culture evolved and has been refined and adapted through its interplay with western and the Pacific cultures. However, it has managed to preserve its uniqueness and distinctiveness. Despite having spent years in Fiji, Girmitiyas had not yet severed their ties with the motherland as many were still in touch with their relatives and family members. A senior citizen (P5, 2023) stated:

Grandfather was in communication with his family members, especially his sister. I used to read the letter and write the response as dictated by grandfather. This continued for some time but whenever he received the letter, he would get emotional and upset. He would start recalling the days when he and one of his friends were met by the people who got them to come to Fiji. A time came when my father said not to give him the letters so that he could forget them and concentrate more on his family here and be happy. Eventually, he stopped asking but I could see the longing in his eyes for his loved ones back in India.

According to P5 (2023) his grandfather had been married and had 7 married children and 18 grandchildren way back in 1964. Despite the passage of time, girmitiyas still held a longing for their families in India. Many considered themselves sojourners, and thought of returning to their homeland while others engaged in farming to support their livelihood and began raising families. Indians interpreted Girit as their baptism of fire which gave them inalienable rights in Fiji, where they desired and intended to remain permanently. Girit had been a struggle and its end did not mean the end of their quest for security and economic advancement. The dreadful working and living conditions under indenture had an irreversible impact on various aspects of their social and cultural lives. According to (P4, 2023):

Grandfather had acquired a piece of land in Ba where he lived with his eight children. All the children were married and were staying

together in an extended family setup. Grandmother has passed away and grandfather was living in a separate house with two of his grandchildren. He had a thatched house; was a religious man. People of all religions used to invite him to do dua at their places and in return they would give him some fruits and groceries. Most of the invitations were usually after a good harvest of rice and other food crops or when new land was prepared for planting. He had a horse and when he got ready and saddled his horse, then my father and uncle would know that he was going somewhere. Sometimes I used to go with him. He was respected by all the people and was referred to as Sai by the people. He enjoyed going to ullu bazaar (flea market) that used to be held near FSC in Ba. He also had a Jahaji bhai in Rakiraki and some times he used to go and spend a week or two with that family. However, after his demise we lost touch with that family.

The years after 1919 saw the implementation of the lessons learnt and the ethos adopted put into practice. The demonstration of defiance and strikes of 1920, 1921, 1943, 1959 and 1960 were all part of their determination to voice out their opinions to obtain equality and improve their living standards (Ali, 1979). Girmitiyas demanded longer leases for their cane farms, better opportunities in education, removal of differential treatment on account of race, and security and equality. Although the caste system had almost ended, Girmitiyas remained divided, largely inspired by personal self-interest or fanatical adherence to sub-cultures of religion or language or province of origin of one's ancestors in India (Ali, 1979). There were conflicts and peaceful exchanges amongst the diaspora in sorting out farming issues like the scheduling of the harvesting of sugar cane.

During the early days the exposure to indigenous Fijian culture was limited as they mostly lived in villages and were restrained from interacting with the Indo-Fijians by the British rulers (Voigt-Graf, 2008). However, by 1970 and following Fiji's independence, the Indo-Fijian community had asserted itself within the country and successfully contributed towards creating the much-needed richness in diversity.

Religion and Religious Organizations

Girmitiyas were able to practice their religions and cultural practices even during the Girit period. They would find solace and tranquillity in the many songs and chants after a hard day's work on the plantations. According

to Brij Lal, Girmit is a moving story of defiance and resistance as how the Girmitiyas were able to practice and preserve their religious beliefs and traditions. This is despite being dislocated from their 'cultural moorings'; 'trapped in indenture, being illiterate and poor, they were able to struggle against great odds to preserve fragments of their ancestral culture in alien surroundings for reassurance, comfort, security and memory' (Lal, 2012: 239). People of different faiths held on to their religious beliefs and practices despite being coerced by the Christian missionaries to convert to Christianity.

Hindu Girmitiyas saw Girmit as an opportunity to unshackle the divisions of hierarchy and the doctrines of the caste system ordained by the Brahmins (Sen, 2012). In other words, they ignored the caste system and preached about the ultimate oneness of humanity and values of equality and fellowship amongst all people. According to Lal (2012) they saw the path to salvation lay in practical devotion (bhakti) and in singing of the songs of praise (bhajans). This approach appealed to the migrants as they saw this as an opportunity to escape from the 'tyranny of the Brahminical pseudo-religious order' (Lal, 2012: 241).

According to (P3, 2023):

Grandfather (nana) and his friends would get together and sing bidesia. Bidesia is a folk song and dance that originated in the Bhojpuri speaking areas of Bihar in India. I could not understand all they were singing but I liked the tune very much. They used to sing about their people in India, the hardships and the difficulties of Girmit period. The Bidesia themes mainly focused on the struggles of the Girmitiyas and hence brought about a social awareness and feeling of solidarity amongst them. My eldest cousin would also read Alha-Khand, a story told in rhythmic form about great warriors of the past. He also used to read jung-nama Hazrat Ali reliving the life and triumphs of a great warrior and leader in Islam. My mom used to make thick roti for him and he liked eating it with 'baigan choka' roasted eggplant. He used to wear his dhoti, round neck shirt and a turban like thing on his head.

By late 19th and early 20th centuries Girmitiyas had access to some of their religious books, manuals on conducting marriage ceremonies, materials on poems, and stories of romance, heroism and adventure (Lal, 2012). There were not many copies of the books; as such they were read by a few who were a bit literate and were recited at social gatherings in the evenings and during festive occasions. Many of the chants and poems used to tell the stories of their loneliness, travels and reminiscing of their childhood memories. Likewise, fes-

tivals such as Ramleela, Diwali and Tazia, provided opportunities to forge a sense of community and belonging. Girmitiyas retained a deep attachment to their religion, whether Hinduism or Islam, and conscientiously observed the rituals for their spiritual faith. This attachment gave them their identity and a sense of security (Prasad, 2015). Girmitiyas used religion as a way to attain and ensure salvation in the afterlife, or to receive assurance of the purpose of their own lives. Spirituality often provides its followers with moral standards or expectations of how they should live and treat others (Voigt-Graf, 2008).

Although, people followed their own religions they willingly took part in other people's cultural activities like Diwali, Ram Lela, Baisakhi, Tirikutu, Eid and other celebrations. (P1, 2023), an elderly lady, recalled how her [g]randfather and grandmother looked forward to the celebration of Ram Leela. One of my uncles would do the role of Hanuman and would get scolded by the grandfather as he was not saying his dialogues properly. Grandfather was very passionate about the religion and people used to gather around him to hear the epic stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharat. Although, my grandfather was illiterate, he could correct people singing the bhajans and would tell when they would miss something in the lines. Although my father and uncles were working on the farms, grandfather still used to ask them how their work was progressing. He would advise them about the seasons and when certain crops needed to be planted. He kept his things neatly on the shelves and always knew if we had touched his stuff. He only used to eat food cooked by grandmother and after her death, my mother used to look after his meals and tidy up his room.

Religious organizations have long played an important role in forming and institutionalizing the emerging religious ideologies and cultural beliefs in the society.

As people started settling in after the Girmit era, they envisaged the need for setting up religious organizations. Nearly 85% of the people brought to Fiji as indentured laborers were Hindus while others were Muslims, Sikhs and some were Christians of Indian origin. The Arya Samaj or the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji was the first religious, cultural and educational organization established in Fiji. From its inception in 1904, it attracted the young, educated and progressive Hindus into its fold. The Arya Samaj was born out of the desire by the Girmitiyas to sustain the religious, cultural and social heritage and provide a social platform for improving their living standards (Arya, 2020).

Shri Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji (Sanatan Fiji) is the largest home-grown Hindu organization in Fiji and was officially registered in 1958

(Leckie, 2011). The Then India Sanmargya Ikyā Sangam (TISI) and Fiji Muslim League were established in 1926.

All these bodies had a strong focus on education, welfare of its people and preservation of its religions and other cultural and religious practices.

As the Indian society struggled to find a voice during the unsavory Girmiti era, other religious organizations sprung up around the cane belt areas, like the Dakshina India Andhra Sangam (DIAS), which was established in 1941. As time passed temples, mosques and gurudwaras were built where people could gather for worships and have meetings and discussions for the spiritual and social development of their societies.

Islam was the second major religion practiced by the Girmitiyas. Muslims came when the first ship brought Indian indentured labourers to Fiji in 1879. The first indentured labour ship, *Leonidas*, had an unusually high proportion (22%) of Muslims. Between 1879 and 1916, a total of 6557 Muslims arrived from Calcutta, while 1091 Muslims came from Madras and 1450 came from Baluchistan and Punjab areas (Ali, 1979). *Leonidas*, the first vessel carting labourers from India, arrived in Fiji on 14th May, 1879, with about 522 passengers, of which 92 were Muslims (Fiji Muslim League, 2023).

Due to their small numbers (approximately 7% of the total population of Fiji), Muslims were being targeted as easy prey for prospective conversions to other religions. As such the leaders of the Muslim community saw an immediate need to preserve their religion, Islamic culture and traditions. In order to combat the conversions and also to carry out Da'wah (propagation) to Muslims and non-Muslims, they began forming compact societies which encouraged the practicing of the teachings of the religion. These energetic religious campaigns laid down the lasting foundations amongst the masses which led to the formation of Fiji Muslim League in 1926.

All the senior citizens interviewed for the purpose of this study paid homage and respect to the Girmitiyas for their vision in setting up of the different religious and cultural groups.

Setting up of Schools

Despite being poor and illiterate, the Girmitiyas had a vision for their children and their grandchildren in Fiji. Education of the children of the Girmitiyas was not a priority of the Colonial Government as they wanted to ensure they remained labourers and worked on the farms (Lal, 2012). It did not encourage nor did it make provision for schools for Indo-Fijian children. With widespread illiteracy among the Indo-Fijians, the Government was certain that

it would succeed in this endeavour. During the period of indenture, however, the Christian missions, driven by both the concern at the inhuman nature of indenture, and their thirst to convert the 'heathens', started schools for Indians. The first schools for Indians were started by the Methodist Mission and the Marist Brothers in 1898. Prominent amongst these is the school now known as Dudley High School, established by Hannah Dudley in 1897 from her verandah, largely for Indian females.

Girmitiyas, however, were determined in their resolve to invest in the education of their children. The establishment of their religious and cultural solidarities gave them the impetus to voice out their opinion on the need to educate their children. They wanted their children to learn about their religion and cultural values, apart from contemporary education (Ali, 1979). Girmitiyas viewed education as a foundation to liberate their children from contract labour and hard work on the farms. Education was also viewed by the Girmitiyas as a means to remove them from the shackles of poverty and as an investment for better living standards (Quanchi, 2005). They were so enthusiastic in their endeavours that they established the schools out of their own poverty. Interview data reveals that people would generously donate the price of a tonne of sugarcane towards the construction of their village schools. Recalling the contributions made by his family (P4,2023) stated that:

I vividly remember grandfather donating some money to the teacher who was trying to establish the school in the village. In the evenings my father and other uncles used to visit him and discuss certain matters of importance. He looked forward to the building of the school in our village. My father and uncles provided the manual labour in cutting the bamboos and 'gadra' grass for thatching the roofs. They used to go after harvesting and doing their share of work on the farm. The bamboos were then splintered and weaved like mats to make the walls. Small drains would be dug around the structure to avoid rain water entering inside as the floor was just the soil. At times they even put grass on the floor to soak the moisture and make sitting on the grass or mat more comfortable. He did not live to see the completion of the school but his contribution of a few shillings led to construction of the school that still exists today and has been transformed into a modern learning institution.

Brij Lal describes the initial schools as 'rudimentary structures often nothing more than grass Huts' as they were made up of grass and branches of trees (Lal, 2012: 240). Girmitiyas and their children used to carry these on their

backs for long distances till they reached the sites where they wanted to build the schools. The land was mostly donated by people living in the settlements.

These initial schools played a crucial role in educating the first and second generation Girmitiya children at a time when the Government was not providing opportunities to them. Girmitiyas were firm and knew that salvation lay through education and decided to adjust their priorities to capitalize on a new path to achievement. According to Prasad (2006), the Government was unable to restrain Indo-Fijian advance, and upon pressure from India, began to invest in schools established in the villages.

This input from the Government synergized the spark for education; there was no looking back again. Having access to education was a remarkable transformation of a community, which started its life as virtual slaves to challenging their masters in areas that was the colonial preserve.

The Arya Samaj Movement in Fiji was very active in education. According to one of the interview respondents, (P1, 2023) Sabha's involvement in education dates back to 1918 when it established Gurukul Primary School at Saweni in Lautoka. Today the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha of Fiji owns and manages facilities for 15 kindergartens, 16 primary schools, 6 secondary schools and a tertiary institution known as The University of Fiji.

Likewise, the Fiji Muslim League has made valuable contribution in the field of education in Fiji. The first school, Islamic Girls School, was already in existence in 1926, established by Muslim Girmitiyas before the League was established. This school later came to be known as Suva Muslim Primary School. Muslims wanted their children to learn Urdu, Arabic and Islamiyat so that they could read the Quran and practice the Hadith (traditions of the Prophet Mohammed PBUH). Today, the Fiji Muslim League owns and manages facilities for 22 primary and 8 secondary schools in Fiji (Fiji Muslim League, 2023).

After the establishment of the Then India Sanmargya Ikya (TISI) Sangam in 1926, this body also decided to venture into building their own schools. The TISI Sangam inspired the South Indians to build their schools and temples to preserve their language and culture and were open to people of all castes and creed. They constructed the first Sangam School at Rakiraki in 1930. Today, TISI owns and manages the facilities for 18 early childhood education centres, 21 primary and 5 secondary schools, and a nursing school (Devi, 2017).

Although Hindi, Urdu, Tamil and Telugu languages were taught in schools, Fiji-Hindi has become the lingua franca and is spoken by Indo-Fijians in Fiji and abroad (Mugler, 2004). Religious organizations in Fiji have always had a major influence in the education sector; these include the TISI Sangam, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Fiji Muslim League, Fiji Sikh Society, Gujarat Society,

Methodist Church of Fiji, and Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha (Goundar, 2019). The setting up of schools added to the realization of the dreams and the visions of the Girmitiyas in leaps and bounds and contributed towards producing many well-known academics and scholars in Fiji and around the globe.

Dispersal of the Diaspora

An important aspect in identity construction among members of the Indo-Fijian diaspora is when they move from Fiji to settle in other countries. The Indo-Fijian diaspora refers to people of Indian origin who have migrated to other countries, either voluntarily or as a result of political, social, or economic reasons (Voigt-Graf, 2008). The Fijian diaspora is estimated to be around 300,000, with the majority living in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. According to Pande (2011) Indo-Fijian diaspora have not only inherited the culture and tradition of the Girmitiyas but have also been immersed in the Fijian culture and the traditions and have a slightly different overview of the world. The Indo-Fijian diaspora has made significant contributions to their host countries in various fields, including medicine, law and education. Although, the socio-cultural structure of Indo-Fijian society has its origin in diverse Indian roots, it has developed its own unique features fed by an essentially oceanic way of life, as well as by local conditions. This uniqueness is supplemented by a specific language and a casteless non-hierarchical society that form the keystone to the Indo-Fijian identity (Pande, 2011). They have also maintained strong connections to their Indian heritage and culture, often forming tight-knit communities and preserving their traditions through cultural practices and social events (Hundt, 2014).

On a similar note, Aporosa (2015) claims that many who have migrated from Fiji or even those born in 'foreign' countries identify first and foremost with their ancestral homeland in the Pacific. While India retains an emotional importance, Indo-Fijians have emerged as a Pacific population in self-perception and in practice.

Meta-synthetical data on secondary diaspora, in this case the Indo-Fijian diaspora, is mostly based on a very informative and impressive case study on *Home is where you're born: Negotiating identity in the diaspora* by the scholar and researcher, Professor Marianne Hundt. Her study notes Fiji Hindi as the mother tongue of Indian diaspora in Fiji, which is also spoken by the Indo-Fijian diaspora in New Zealand (Hundt, 2014).

The Fiji Government has also encouraged the teaching of conversational i-Taukei and Hindi in schools from year 5 up to secondary level. The aim is to equip Fijian students of Indian ethnicity to know conversational Fijian and the

iTaukei students to know conversational Hindi for better understanding and cooperation (Lal, 2011). The significance of Fiji Hindi for the Indo-Fijian diaspora is emphasised by the comment made by P7, 2023:

I migrated in 1990 but we still speak Fiji Hindi at home and whenever we have family gatherings, we always converse in Fiji Hindi. The many stories and jokes can be best enjoyed when they are shared in Fiji Hindi. We have been born speaking this language and it creates a bond within all Indo-Fijians living here. We celebrate Fiji festivals like Fiji Day celebrations and Bula festivals and many others to renew our Fijian touch and rejoice being part of one big family through music, songs and dramas. I always go and watch stage shows where our Indo-Fijian artists from Fiji come and perform. The Fiji experience can never be forgotten as we all have family members in Fiji and Fiji Hindi is what binds us all together.

There is no doubt that language plays an important role in maintaining one's identity and cultural practices. Though a century has passed after the Girmit era, the Indian diaspora as well as the Indo-Fijian diaspora still speak Fiji Hindi. Even the 2000 Education Commission highlights the importance of Fiji Hindi and mentions that 'for the vast majority of Indo-Fijians the mother tongue is Fiji Hindi. Fiji Hindi should be recognized as a distinct language with its own grammar' (Fiji Islands Education Commission, 2000: 298). Shameem considers Fiji as the place of birth of Fiji Hindi and proposes that it should be honoured and respected in the country as it is part of the heritage Girmitiyas have left behind for the future generations (Shameem, 2017).

The Indo-Fijian diaspora have also been able to hold on fast to the many traditional practices and religious celebrations that they were celebrating in Fiji.

During the indenture system Indians of different caste background lived and ate together. They worked together on the plantations, irrespective of their caste, eroding the occupational differentiation inherent in the caste system (Voigt-Graf, 2008). Hindus practiced a more egalitarian religious philosophy. They formed small groups, commonly known as Ramayan mandalis, and sang kirtans and bhajans (Hindu religious songs). Despite being coexisting with the Indigenous Fijians, the Indo-Fijians have been able to preserve their many religious and cultural practices (Hundt, 2014). This is because there has been little in the way of cultural borrowing or adaptation and there virtually haven't been many intermarriages between the groups. As a result, and in contrast to more

integrated countries such as Mauritius or Trinidad, no 'creolized' culture has developed (Hundt, 2014). (P9, 2023) agreed that:

The songs and chants are still the same as practiced by the Girmitiyas. Some of the festivals celebrated by the Indo-Fijian diaspora are Diwali, Holi, Ram Naumi, Krishna Janmashtami and Ram Leela to mention a few. We have our temples and religious centres for the preservation of our religions. The Indo-Fijian diaspora in New Zealand, especially in Auckland even celebrate soccer tournaments just like in Fiji. We have the Sangam conventions and other religious associations who practice and preserve their culture and traditions.

Likewise, the Indo-Fijian Muslim diaspora has established their mosques and centres for the propagation of their religious beliefs and traditions. According to (P8, 2023) they celebrate the month of fasting by having Iftar parties for the whole month with family and friends. Then comes the celebration of Eid ul Fitr commonly known as Eid followed by Eid ul Adha. A special dish is prepared on Eid known as samai and is much enjoyed by all.

People of the Sikh faith celebrate Vaisakhi as a major Sikh festival; this festival marks the birth of the Khalsa order by Guru Gobind Singh. They have also established beautiful gurdwaras as places of worship and religious activities (Hundt, 2014).

Interview data further reveals that the Indo-Fijian diaspora of south Indian descent also perform *tirikutu*, which is a dance drama in form of ritual and social entertainment and a medium of social instruction. This community is also famous for the dazzling fire walking festival that takes place in July or August and attracts big crowds from the Hindu community. The tradition of walking across a pit of hot coals is believed to cultivate a sense of self-discipline and spiritual cleansing.

In colonial times, race relations were a reflection of British colonial policy where the indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians were discouraged from engaging with one another (Voigt-Graf, 2008). As with time interaction between the two major races, and the associated of integration of the Indigenous Fijian culture in the Indo-Fijian cultural celebrations and rituals increased. Increasingly, the Indigenous Fijians are able to speak and understand the Fiji Hindi; likewise, an increasing number of Indo-Fijians can communicate in the iTaukei language. The early years of segregation later turned into meaningful integration in each other's many rituals and celebrations without compromising the sanctity of the events. One example is the consumption of kava by Indo-Fijian community in weddings and other cultural activities; this has now become a norm. Kava consumption by Indo-Fijians is not only present in Fiji but is also common in other

countries where the Indo-Fijian diaspora have resettled (Aporosa, 2015). Likewise, *lovo* cooking is very meaningful in Indigenous Fijian culture and village life; this art of preparing it has been very well adopted by the Indian diaspora. This unique method of cooking food in underground ovens has been in practice in Fiji for centuries. Girmitiya's adopted this method. Similarly, the Indo Fijian diaspora in New Zealand do *lovo* during celebrations or special occasions such as birthdays, marriages and other family gatherings.

The true allegiance of the Indo-Fijian diaspora with Fiji can be seen during the HSBC sevens rugby tournaments when they come out in force to support the Fiji Team. According to Voigt-Graf (2008) there is a big Indo-Fijian diaspora in Australia that also celebrate all their religious and cultural festivals in style.

According to Voigt-Graf, the Indo-Fijian diaspora 'have created transnational spaces that are centred around Fiji and that largely exclude their ancestral homeland India' (2008: 1). Indo-Fijians feel ostracized by subcontinental Indians and in the process have become more conscious of their Pacific origin, including through the use of the 'Fijian' aspect of their hyphenated ethnicity (Pande, 2011). Interview data reveals that the Indo-Fijian diaspora regard Fiji as their homeland and practice all the religious and cultural obligations they learnt in Fiji. One of the Indo-Fijian diasporas (P10, 2023) recalled accompanying his father to the Ramanyan mandalis on Tuesdays and listening to the bhajans and the kirtans. All the respondents stated that their religious and cultural upbringing in Fiji has enabled them to practice their religions and pass on the values to their children who were even born in New Zealand.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Indian diaspora in Fiji has benefited a lot from the many sacrifices and contributions of the Girmitiyas. The establishment of cultural and religious groups assisted in preserving the religion and the culture of the people. Likewise, the setting up of schools strengthened the teaching of religious scriptures and laid strong foundations for an enlightened and educated society. Descendants of Girmitiyas who moved away from Fiji have been able to practice their religions and cultural obligations effectively. As a community, Indo-Fijians are transnational and cosmopolitan with most families having close relatives living in other countries. At heart, many Indo-Fijians regard New Zealand as their new perpetual home, Fiji as their emotional home and India as their ancestral home. While India retains historical importance, Indo-Fijians have emerged as a Pacific population in self-perception and in practice.

Girmitiyas were the real architects of the society we live in and were a shining example of survival, solidarity, sacrifice and service to our nation. Communities cannot grow in the ignorance of their past, as they have a formidable legacy that needs to be nourished and nurtured by successive generations. A People's early history should never be forgotten but should be appreciated, valued and respected. So should be the culture, language and identity of the Girmitiyas. In essence, the indenture system has spawned a new society in Fiji that is more egalitarian and liberal in nature with a rich culture and an impressive heritage.

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