

From Girmitiyas to Fijian Indian Diaspora: Emergence and Engagement in Development of Fiji

Manoranjan Mohanty

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Abstract

Indian migration to Fiji is rooted in the British indentured labour system. The immigrants that came to Fiji between 1879-1916 under 'girit' (or Agreement) are called 'girmitiyas'. Despite wide linguistic and religious diversities that existed within 'girmitiyas', the ethnic group identity and traditional cultural mosaic was generally preserved in Fiji. Fiji witnessed a gradual transformation of the girmitiyas. The 'old' girmitiyas have gradually transformed into distinct Fijian-Indian 'new' diaspora in Fiji. They formed various social and cultural associations in Fiji that have contributed significantly to the welfare and social and cultural development especially in the field of education, art, music, and dance. They have been deeply engaged in social, cultural and economic life and development in Fiji, making it a modern society today. The paper examines girmitiyas in Fiji, the emergence, and the process of transformation into Fijian-Indian diaspora from historical and contemporary perspectives and their engagement in development in Fiji.

Key words: Development, diaspora engagement, Fijian- Indian diaspora, girmitiyas

Introduction

The abolition of slavery and the emancipation of African slaves in 1838 created a severe shortage of labourers working on plantations (sugar, coffee, tea, cocoa, rice and rubber) (John, 2006: 674 cited in Mohanty, 2013). This created new demands for labour. Soon after the abolition of slavery, Britain started indentured labour system. Under British Indentured labour system, over one million labourers from India were shipped to several British colonies between 1834 and 1917, mostly to work on plantations in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Among others, the countries of Indian indentured labour migration include Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, South Africa (Natal), Fiji, Jamaica, Suriname and East Africa. The indentured labourers were under five-year contracts; over decades, they came to be known as *girmitiyas*. Currently, Indian origin population in major girmitiya countries though declining, still accounts for nearly two-third of Mauritius's population and between 30 to 40 per cent of Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago and Fiji populations, and about 27 per cent of Suriname's population (CIA World Factbook 2023).

Sir Arthur Hamilton-Gordon, the then Governor of Fiji who had experience with Indian indentured labourers in Mauritius and Trinidad, introduced indentured labour system in Fiji. Indians were brought in between 1879 and 1916 as indentured labourers to work on the sugarcane plantations of the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) Company and other employers. British colonization in Fiji lasted 96 years from 1874. The indenture system ended on 12 March 1917; the last indentured contract officially ended on 1 January 1920, ending the Girit system.

Fiji's Girmitiyas rose from misery, poverty and exploitation under the indenture system, to free and relatively self-sufficient Fiji-Indian diaspora community (Lal, 1996, Lal et al, 2006; Mohanty 2020). Despite linguistic and religious diversities that existed among the girmitiyas, a group identity emerged, which was preserved. From an 'old' Indian diaspora the *girmitiyas* gradually transformed into a distinct Fijian Indian 'new' diaspora. They formed various social and cultural associations in Fiji that have contributed significantly to the welfare and social and cultural development especially in the field of education, art, music, and dance. They were deeply engaged in social, cultural and economic life and development in Fiji, making it a modern society, today. The paper examines *girmitiyas* in Fiji, their emergence, and the process of transformation into Fijian Indian diaspora from historical and contemporary perspectives and their engagement in social, cultural, economic and political development in Fiji.

Emergence of Fiji Girmitiyas

The first ship ‘*Leonidas*’, with 463 indentured labourers from India arrived in Fiji waters outside Levuka on May 14, 1879. They were brought on a five-year agreement or ‘*Girmit*’. The SS Sutelej was the last ship carrying 888 labourers which landed in Fiji on 11 November 1916. The labourers originated from different regions, villages, backgrounds and castes, who mingled and intermarried to form distinct cultural groups. Organised indentured labour migration for Fiji lasted 37 years, with a total of 87 shiploads of Indians being transported to Fiji between 1879 and 1916. Over 60,000 Indian migrants arrived during this period. The causes of migration are attributed to political and economic situations in the ancestral homeland. Hugh Tinker called the indentured migration system in Fiji as ‘a system of slavery in disguise’. The system included people from the lower social strata who were ‘pushed’ into migration due to the prevailing socio-economic conditions at that time (cited in Pande, 2011:126.).

During the indentured labour system, the labourers had five-year contracts to work in Fiji, after which they were free to return to India at their own costs. In 1884, the first lot of labourers completed their five-year contracts. Up until 1925, nearly 52,000 *girmitiyas* were entitled to return to India at the expense of the government (Prasad, 1978: 68). Nearly 40 per cent returned to India and 60 per cent of *girmitiyas* choose to remain in Fiji; most of those who chose to stay, stayed in rural communities as small farmers.

Plantation Life & Girmitiyas’ Struggles

The *girmitiyas* embraced the local culture and assimilated themselves into the alien land (Mahanta, 2015). They worked under harsh and restrictive conditions in Fiji’s sugar industry controlled by the Colonial Sugar Refining (CSR) Company. *Girmitiyas* had harsh plantation life; the conditions on sugar cane plantations were so miserable that they called their lives *narak* (hell). The living space or sheds in which the *girmitiyas* were housed were called ‘lines’ which were minimal. Unlike the Caribbean and elsewhere, where indentured Indian labourers occupied the ‘lines’ inhabited by African slaves, in Fiji, the plantations were built from scratch. The sheds were partitioned into 10 x 7 feet cubicles. In 1908, the size of ‘lines’ were increased to 10 feet by 12 feet (Girmit.org, n.d). The ‘life on the plantation was geared to work the labourer to maximum capacity without significant care for environmental sanitation, nutri-

tion, infestations, ill-health and emotional well-being’ (Sharma, 2017: 117).

There was wide linguistic and religious diversity within *girmitiyas*. Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali and others formed their own linguistic groups in Fiji. Despite these diversities, the ethnic group identity was, however, preserved.

A unique culture developed during the Girit era. The ‘old’ *girmitiya* diaspora composed of different caste, creed, language and religion lived together in the colonial plantations and produced a distinct cultural mosaic and identity, which is typically Fiji-Indian (Naidu, 2017; Mohanty, 2020). Over time, a common lingua franca, a plantation language, *Fiji Baat* evolved to connect the *girmitiyas* (Naidu, 2017). The plantation Hindi language later came to be known as ‘Fiji Hindi’ which was an amalgamation of various ‘dialects’ or spoken languages.

Shifting Identities

The plantation Hindi language became a distinctive identity of *girmitiyas*. The *girmitiyas* gradually shed away their caste identities and established a caste-less society in Fiji. The ‘India-born’ *girmitiya* indentured labourers transformed into ‘Fiji Indians’ with an identity of Indian ancestry. After acquiring citizenship, they were designated as Fiji citizens. After Fiji’s independence in 1970, they were variously called ‘Fiji-born Indian’, ‘Indo-Fijian’, ‘Fiji-Indians’, and so forth (Naidu 2017:20). The term ‘Indo-Fijian’ was used by Adrian Mayer (1963) to distinguish the Fiji-born from the India-born *girmitiyas*. The term ‘Fiji-Indian’ was used by several writers (Gillion, 1958, 1962; Ali, 1973, 1979). With the adoption of Fiji Constitution 2013, all ethnic groups in Fiji were given a common name called ‘Fijian’.

From Girmitiyas to Fijian Indian Diaspora

By 1911 of the total 40,286 Indian immigrant population in Fiji, nearly 72 per cent were India-born *girmitiyas* and 27.5 per cent were Fiji-born Indians (Prasad, 1978: 68). The number of India-born *girmitiyas* declined throughout the 1920s, primarily through repatriation. In 1921, the Census recorded 60,634 Indian origin population, of which, nearly 55 per cent were ‘India-born’ and 44 per cent were locally born Indians (Prasad 1978). Ramesh (2017) noted that by 1946, some 101,000 of the 120,000 Indians were born in the colony and had transformed from Indians to Indo-Fijians.

Since the end of the Indentured labour system in 1920, the *girmitiya* population has undergone massive transformation. Fiji witnessed the rise of the

indentured girmitiya labourers from misery, poverty and exploitation to a community of relative prosperity forming a distinct Fijian-Indian diaspora. Inter-generational differences between *girmitiyas* and their Fiji-born offsprings did exist during the Gimit era (Naidu, 2017:18). Differences between them were observed in the language they used and the clothes they wore (Lal, 2000:26). The Fiji-born Indians adopted 'island ways' adding to the anxiety of the 'old' girmitiyas (Naidu, 2017:18).

The Indian immigration and Fijian-Indian diaspora formation in Fiji may be broadly categorised into three distinct phases.

During the first phase of Indian migration between 1879 and 1916, altogether over 260 social groups comprising Hindu castes/sub-castes, Muslim and tribal groups came to Fiji with a diversified background in terms of religion, caste and region (Lal, 1983). They came from different regions and backgrounds. A majority of the workers originated from the Northern provinces of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and central India (Ali and Crocombe, 1981). In January 1879, thirty-one Indians, who had originally been indentured labourers in Réunion, were brought from New Caledonia to Fiji under contract to work on a plantation in Taveuni. In 1881, thirty-eight more Indians arrived from New Caledonia, but most of them left while some stayed marrying Indian or island women (Gimit.org, n.d). In 1888, thirty-four women came with 51 young children and were unaccompanied by husbands (Shameem, 1990: 150). Forty-five thousand came from North India via Calcutta and fifteen thousand from South India via Madras (Lal, 1998:1). More than 85 per cent of the immigrants were Hindus, and 8 per cent Muslims and the remainder were Christians or professed other religions (Naidu, 2017:13).

The *girmitiyas*, who completed five years of contract work, became 'free'; some accepted Fiji as their new homeland, leased land and became small tenant farmers. Nearly 25,000 returned to India upon the end of their *Gimits*. Those staying back worked as farmers, labourers and as petty business people (Naidu and Reddy, 2002). The India-born *girmitiyas* that formed an 'old diaspora' gradually transformed into 'new' Fijian Indian diaspora.

The second stream of Indian immigrants to Fiji was the influx of a heterogeneous collection of some 2,000 to 3,000 Indians who came to Fiji either as 'free migrants' or under contracts without penal sanctions (Willson, et al., 1990: 102). Some Indians came at their own expense; by 1911, the rate of these Indian free migrants was 250 per year (Ali, 1973). By 1920, there was a 'sizeable free Indian population'. These were mostly 'farmers from Punjab and traders, jewellers and merchants from Gujarat' (Ali, 1973). The Gujarati immi-

grants, mostly Hindus, first arrived in 1906 (Miller, 2008: 64). These and their descendant's, made less than 10 per cent of the total Fiji Indian population by the 1990's (Kelly, 1992). The community formed a distinct Gujarati diaspora in Fiji, rising in numbers from 324 in 1921, to 2,500 by 1936 (Ali and Crocombe, 1981). The establishment of intense trade, commerce and business in Fiji started with the arrival of the Gujarati community; they also 'established local business networks with ties to India' (Miller, 2008).

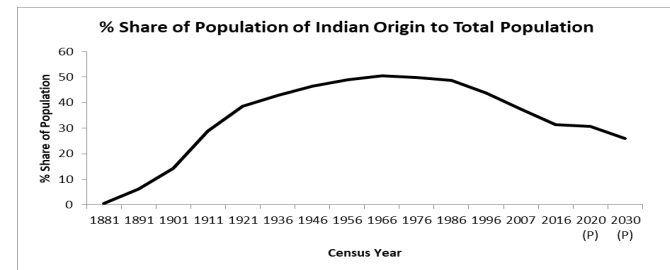
Immigrants from the Northern provinces of Punjab, especially from the districts of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur, generally sought agricultural work (Gillion, 1962: 133 cited in Miller, 2008: 64). The earliest Punjabi immigrants arrived in 1904, but the majority of immigrants arrived after 1920 (Miller, 2008: 64). These Sikh migrants often formed distinct Indian diaspora elsewhere in the world. But in Fiji, they were very small in numbers. According to one estimate, the Sikh diaspora in Fiji numbered between 2,000 to 2,500 during 1890-1910 (Tatla, 1993:68). In 2007, their number was 2,577 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2008a).

The *third* and the contemporary stream, which accelerated since independence in 1970, is the stream of 'free' and 'unassisted' Indian immigrants. Besides, the Gujarati traders and businessmen, they include more skilled categories including professionals and technicians that are working in the entire range of sectors in the country.

Trends in Fijian-Indian Diaspora Population in Fiji

Figure 1 shows the trends of the Fijian Indian population since 1881, two years after the first arrival of *girmitiyas* in Fiji.

Figure 1. Trends in Persons of Indian Origin in Fiji, 1881 to 2030



(Source: Chart by the author, based on data from Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

As Figure 1 shows, there was a gradual increase in Indian migrants until the end of migration of 1916. The 1921 Census recorded 60,634 persons of Indian origin; this population subsequently increased to more than half of Fiji's total population by 1966 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2008a). The year 1966 can be considered as a year of great 'Demographic Divide' in the history of Indian migration in Fiji. Thereafter, the proportion of the Indian origin population started declining gradually.

The annual growth rate of the Fijian Indian population declined to -0.3 per cent in 1986. The main reason for such a decline was the decrease in the fertility rate of the Indian population (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2008b). After 1986, especially after the 1987 coup, emigration of Fiji-Indians became more intense. Political instability after the May 1987 military coup, became a far more important contributor to large-scale emigration thereby decreasing the Fiji-Indian population (Mohanty, 2001). The following decades witnessed a faster decline in the population of Indian origin; the decadal change of the Indian population was -2.8 and -7.4 in 1996 and 2007 Census period respectively (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2008a). In almost five decades, the proportion of the population of Indian descent declined from nearly 51 per cent in 1966 to 31 per cent in 2016; it is projected that it will further decline to about 26 per cent by 2030 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Distribution Patterns of Fijian Indian diaspora Population in Fiji

Before independence, a large proportion of Indian population lived in rural areas, largely engaged as agriculturalists. The 1966 census shows that 80 per cent of the Fiji-Indian population lived in rural areas (Ali, 1973). The 'old' *girmitiyas* and their descendants gradually got distributed in various provinces within Fiji.

Table 1 shows the distribution of the Fiji-Indian population in Fiji by province. In 2007, Ba province had the highest concentration of Fijian Indian diaspora population, hosting about 40 per cent of total Fijian Indian population. This was followed by Naitasiri (19 per cent), Macuata (14 per cent), Rewa (8 per cent) and Nadroga-Navosa province (7 per cent). The other provinces such as Tailevu, Ra, Cakaudrove and Serua accounted for between 2 to 5 per cent each.

The Fijian Indian population is predominantly Hindus, accounting for little less than three-fourth of total Fiji-Indian population. In 2007, this was followed by Muslims (17 per cent), Christians (6 per cent), Sikhs (0.9 per cent),

and others (2 per cent) (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2008a).

Table 1. Distribution of Fijian-Indian Population by Province in Fiji, 2007

Province	Fiji-Indian population	% Share of Fiji Indian Population
Ba	126,142	40.2
Naitasiri	58,496	18.6
Macuata	42,550	13.6
Rewa	24,082	7.7
Nadroga-Navosa	22,140	7.1
Tailevu	14,212	4.5
Ra	8,888	2.8
Cakaudrove	7,929	2.5
Serua	5,830	1.9
Bua	2,367	0.8
Others*	1,165	0.5
Total Fiji-Indian	313,801	100.0

*Others are Bua (514), Lomaiviti (494), Lau (88), Kadavu (49), Rotuma (20).

(Source: Table by the author, based on data from Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2008a.)

The dominant Hindu sect within the Fiji-Indian population is Sanatan Dharam followed by Arya Samaj, Kabir Panthi and followers of Satya Sai Baba. The Fijian Indian diaspora in Fiji is more 'divergent diaspora'. This includes diversified religious sub-groups such as Hindu, Muslim and Sikh diaspora, and in terms of language such as Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, and Malayalam diaspora. The Fijian Indian population witnessed a gradual language loss in Fiji over generations, especially speakers of Dravidian languages such as Malayalam and Kanada (Naidu, 2017:19).

Fijian-Indian Diaspora Engagement in development of Fiji

The girmitiyas and their descendants have had different levels of engagement in the social, cultural, economic and political development of Fiji.

Agriculture and the Girmitiya Economy

The *girmitiyas* as indentured labourers in the sugarcane plantations struggled and maintained sugarcane production, supporting the growth of country's economy during and after the colonial period. The sugar industry

was the colony's economic lifeline and played a critical role in the development of Fiji. As sugar became the dominant sector in Fiji's economy, Indian indentured labourers were indispensable for sugar cane production and maintenance of the sugar industry. After the expiry of their indentureship, they leased small plots of land from the sugar refining company, as well as the government and indigenous Fijians (*i-Taukei*) and developed their own farms and grew vegetables. The land leases terms varied from 10 to 99 years. Some Indians became hawkers or set up small shops.

Some Girmitiyas established small businesses in the towns and cities, while some entered administrative positions, finance sector and various other professions in Fiji (Kumar, 2012:1054). Money lending was also practised within the Indian community. There was a practice of farmers depositing money with shopkeepers, who offered interest as much as 10 per cent and provided no security (Ali, 1977). Ali (1977) noted that about 10 per cent of Indian indentured labourers or their descendants became landlords, moneylenders or shopkeepers.⁶ The moneylenders who were mostly the landlords and shopkeepers, exploited the farmers, to the extent that their exploitation led to high indebtedness of Indian farmers. In 1961, an unpublished sample survey of 533 farmers found that 69.6 per cent farmers were indebted or without any savings and another 14.8 per cent were indebted (Ali, 1973). Frazer (1968) noted that 'indebtedness is a fairly general state though precise figures are impossible to collect'.

In terms of occupational engagement during the 1960s, Indians were involved mostly in primary industries, largely as sugarcane farmers. The 1968 Agricultural Census found that there were 14,800 individual growers, and almost 90 per cent of growers were Indians (Ali, 1973). Fisk (1970) stated that Indians were engaged in small-scale enterprises, including most of the commercial farming (cited in Ali, 1973). By the 1976 census, Kelly (1992) noted that 38 per cent of Indians were in agriculture and most of them were self-employed cane growers.

There was a gradual transformation of traditional Indian society in Fiji and a growing diversification of occupations of Indians. Indian landholdings increased in acreage and Indian farmers showed diversification to crop plantations like rice, bananas, and cotton, besides fruits and vegetables for their own consumption as well as for sale (Ali, 1977). Due to favourable climate, rare occurrence of natural disasters like flooding and cyclones and non-existence of

⁶ This is a relatively high proportion of the population. Further research on this is necessary to confirm this.

starvation and famine, a section of the Indian community in Fiji became successful agriculturalists and marked the emergence of a *nouveau riche* class (Ali, 1977).

Within three to four generations, the *girmitiyas* transformed themselves from bonded agricultural labourers to small-holder farmers, artisans, lower and higher-ranking government officials, and in some cases to entrepreneurs and skilled professionals. Over the years, Fijian Indians invested in sugarcane farming, trade and commerce. The sugar cane farming was predominately in Indian hands; until about 2 decades back, they held about 90 per cent of total cane leased land in Fiji (Naidu and Reddy, 2002). As their living standards improved, they invested not only in sugarcane farming but also in trade, commerce and professional services.

Registered Businesses

Kelly (1992) notes that 82 per cent of those employed in land transport and 13 per cent in water transport were Indians. Fiji-Indians were also involved and continue to run land transport, construction, wholesale, and retail trade, and are employed in professions and professional services such as medicine, law, accounting, banking and so forth. There is no precise recent data or study on the ratio of the *girmitiyas* and the passage migrants in these areas.

The passage migrants – largely the Gujaratis – were overwhelmingly a community of shopkeepers in Fiji. Statistics on Fiji Indian business registration between 1924 and 1945 show that of the total 600 Indian businesses, Gujaratis registered in 322 businesses (i.e., 54 per cent), and *girmitiyas* (and their descendant) in 245 businesses (41 per cent), while the remaining 33 businesses (5 per cent) were with Punjabis and others (Prasad, 1978: 263). Of the total Indian businesses, *girmitiyas* and their descendants, vis-à-vis other Indians – dominated in transport or taxis business (85 per cent), construction (82 per cent), auto supplies/service station (88 per cent) and general merchant businesses (50 per cent) and in other businesses such as photography, restaurants and film distribution. Table 2 provides details on this.

Table 2: Fiji-Indian Registered Businesses, 1924-1945

Indian Business	Indian Businesses undertaken by:			
	Girmitiya & their descendants		Gujaratis	
	No	%	No	%
Construction	9	81.8	1	9.1
Transport or Taxis	52	85.2	2	3.3
General Merchant	69	50.4	50	36.5
Tailor/Draper	3	1.9	153	98.0
Jeweller	10	22.2	35	77.8
Laundry	1	4.3	22	95.7
Restaurant	4	44.4	5	55.6
Cinema operator/ film distributor	17	73.9	4	17.4
Auto sup- plies/service station	7	87.5	-	-
Others	73	57.5	50	39.4
Total	245	40.8	322	53.7

(Source: Prepared by the author, based on data from Prasad (1978: 263). The data was from Business Records, Office of the Registrar-General, Suva.)

Fijian- Indian Labour Force

By the time of the 2007 Census, about 54 per cent of labour force among Fijian Indian population was economically active (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2008b). As Table 3 shows, of all salaried occupations, 39 per cent were Fijian-Indians.

As Table 3 shows, Fijian Indians constituted nearly 54 per cent of Fiji's legislators, senior officials and managers; 42 per cent of the country's professionals and 65 per cent of plant and machine operators and assemblers. They also occupied almost half of the country's technician, associate professional, and clerical positions. They are engaged as skilled agriculture and forestry workers, crafts & related trade workers, and plant and machine operators and assemblers.

Table 3. Occupational Engagement of Fiji- Indian Population, 2007

Category of occupation	Total	% Fiji-Indians	% share to Fiji-Indian occupation
Armed forces	73	2.7	0.05
Legislators, Sr. official & managers	9,969	54.1	7.5
Professionals	11,657	41.8	8.8
Technicians & Associate professional	10,947	49.8	8.3
Clerks	9,396	49.9	7.1
Service workers & shops/market assistants	9,687	30.6	7.3
Skilled Agriculture & forestry workers	33,981	26.0	25.6
Crafts & related trade workers	20,349	56.4	15.4
Plant & machine operators & Assemblers	14,063	64.7	10.6
Elementary occupation	12,433	36.6	9.4
Grand Total	132,555	38.6	100.0

(Source: Table prepared by the author, based on data from Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2016)

Fiji has been transformed from a predominantly agricultural and subsistence economy to a middle-income cash economy. Fijian Indian diaspora contributed immensely to almost all sectors of the economy, including agriculture, business and commerce, trade, transport and communication, industry and the overall economic development of the country. While the economy is dominated by Gujarati businessmen, *girmitiyas* and their descendants predominated in the government and social sectors and have contributed to almost all sectors through their technical and professional skills.

Social and Cultural Development

The *girmitiyas* and the contemporary Fijian Indian diaspora also contributed significantly to socio-cultural development through education and health and cultural advancements. The rural *girmitiya* settlements developed social and political organisations ranging from cane harvest gangs to school committees (Miller, 2008) and farmer organisations. Subsequently, various organisations emerged in Fiji that have contributed significantly to welfare and social and cultural development. Notable among them are the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Arya Samaj, Dakshina India Andhra Sangam, TISI Sangam, Muslim League, Sanatan Dharama Pratinidhi Sabha, Sanatan Dharama Sabha, Sathya Sai Service Organisation and Sikh associations of Fiji. Gujaratis made their contributions through Gujarat Samaj, Gujarat Education Society, Kshatriya Society, and the newly established Fiji Seva Sangha.

Educational Development in Fiji: Role of Fijian- Indian Organisations

The hunger and enthusiasm for education was the key element in the economic and social success of Indians in Fiji. From very early in their stay in Fiji, Indians recognised the value of education in improving the quality of life. They focussed on western education to be in equal footing with Europeans and aspire to become *baboos* (Ali, 1977). There was demand for schools, but the colonial administration was reluctant to provide these. By the end of 1919, there was only one government School for Indians and 17 partially assisted schools (Ali, 1977). Groups of Girmitiyas organised themselves and commenced development of schools for their children. Later, Indian Organisations such as Arya Samaj, the Sanatan Dharam Sabha, the Madras Mahasangam and Christian Marist Brothers joined in, but there remained a shortage of qualified and trained teachers in schools. Christian missionaries made a substantial contribution to educational development in Fiji.

By the end of 1930’s, the government established a teacher training college in Fiji and provided aid to a small number of Indians studying abroad (Ali, 1977). In 1921, the government sent four Indians to India for agricultural training. Some Indians left Fiji to obtain tertiary education. As per the Manpower Resources Council Report, 1968, of the total 464 Indian local graduates, nearly 25 per cent were Indian graduates opted for employment overseas (cited in Ali, 1973). As of November 1970, of the total 653 private and scholarship students attending Universities, nearly 67 per cent were Indian students studying science, architecture and engineering, accountancy and commerce, law, medicine, pharmacy and agriculture, dairy and forestry (Ali, 1973).

The education sector is uniquely placed in Fiji due to the fact that, of the total 908 primary and secondary schools in 2020, about 98.5 per cent of them are run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private sector organisations; only 1.5 per cent of schools were owned and operated by the government.

The NGO owned schools are of various types. There are large national organisations (like religious bodies), which established schools. As Table 4 shows, now nearly 13 per cent of schools (i. e 112 schools) are controlled and managed by such large Fiji-Indian Organisations (for example, Arya Samaj, the Sanatan Dharam Sabha, the TISIS, etc). A significant number of autonomous Indian committees own a considerable number of schools.

Table 4: Primary & Secondary Schools by Controlling Authority, 2014-2020

Controlling Authority	No of Schools		% Share 2020	% change, 2014-2020
	2014	2020		
NGO / private Sector				
-Fiji-Indian Organisations	114	112	12. 5	-1.8
-Other Organisations	800	783	87.5	-2.1
Total NGO/private sector	914	895	98. 5	-2.1
Govt. Sector				
Ministry of Education	14	13	1.5	-7.1
Grant Total	928	908	100. 0	-2.1

(Source: author, based on data from Fiji Ministry of Education, Heritage, Culture and Arts, 2014, and Government of Fiji, 2020).

Among the schools controlled by Fiji-Indian Organisations in 2020, nearly 87 per cent of schools were controlled by Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Then India Sanmarga Ikya (TISI) Sangam, Fiji Muslim League, Gujarat Education Society, Macuata Muslim League, Dakshina India Andhra Sangam and Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha; Table 5 provides this data.

Table 5: Primary & Secondary Schools Controlled by National Fiji-Indian Organisations, 2020

Indian Organisation	No Schools	% share
1. Arya Pratinidhi Sabha	23	20.5
2. TISI Sangam	23	20.5
3. Fiji Muslim League	22	19.6
4. Gujarat Education Society	8	7.1
5. Macuata Muslim League	8	7.1
6. Dakshina India Andhra Sangam	7	6.3
7. Sanatan Dharam Pratinidhi Sabha	6	5.4
8. Sikh Community	5	4.5
9. Ahmadiya Muslim Association	4	3.6
10. Rishikul Maha Sabha	3	2.7
11. Shree Sanatan Dharam	2	1.8
12. Jamiat Ahle-Hadith-Fiji	1	0.9
Total	112	100.0

(Source: Prepared by Mohanty, M. based on data from Government of Fiji, 2020).

The Arya Samaj and TISI Sangam make for the largest share of schools owned by national Indian organisations. The Arya Samaj was the first Indian religious organisation established in Fiji (1904) (Wikipedia, 2023a). The first school built by Arya Samaj in Fiji was the Gurukul Primary School in Saweni, Lautoka which was established in 1918. The Arya Samaj continued its educational activities and built numerous educational institutions including providing the land, buildings and funds to establish the University of Fiji.

As stated above, other than the established national organisations, there are a number of autonomous locally based Indian organisations which established and own schools in Fiji. No detailed study has been carried out on this.

Art, Music, Dance and Cultural Development in Fiji

Fiji emerged as a multicultural nation with rich cultural traditions and diversity. Fijian-Indians retained their cultural and religious traditions, including music, dance, festivals and cultural values. Among the cultural groups, about 77 per cent of Indian origin population in Fiji were Hindus, the dominant sect being Sanatan Dharam, which accounted for about 74 per cent of the Hindu population in Fiji, followed by Arya Samaj, accounting for 3.6 per cent (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2008a). The other religious faiths among Fiji-Indian Diaspora community include Islam, Christianity and Sikhism.

The girmitiyas maintained the cultural development through traditional local folk music including tambura bhajan, kirtan, lok geet, ramayan katha and qawali (Miller, 2008:181). Ramlila and 'chautal are popular among the Hindu diaspora. The folklore of the Fijians of Indian descent is derived from traditional Indian folklore and the epics *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*. These are read and chanted by Fijians of Indian descents at ceremonies and celebrations. Girmitiyas and their descendants built religious establishments, including temples, mosques, gurudwaras and churches in Fiji which carried out their core functions, but which also played their roles in provision of social welfare services during natural disasters and emergencies. There exist nearly 57 Hindu temples in Fiji today (Shaivam.org, n. d.).

Girmitiyas and contemporary Fijian Indians' contribution to art and architecture in Fiji is unresearched. The visual landmark, Sri Siva Subramaniya Hindu temple in Nadi, is a major architectural attraction for tourists. But this temple was built in the traditions of ancient Dravidian Indian temple architecture, by tradesmen brought from India.

Role of Ramayan Mandalis in Fiji

Ramayan Mandalis play a critical role in diaspora engagement in Fiji. These Mandalis emerged during the 1930s and 1940s as the fundamental institution of Sanatan Dharam practice in Fiji, partly through the influence of visiting Hindu missionaries from India (Miller, 2008: 252). Ian K. Samarville observed that three out of every ten adult Sanatani males were members of Ramayan Mandalis, with an estimated number of 400 to 500 Ramayan Mandalis Fiji-wide (cited in Miller, 2008). The comments by Fiji's former High Commissioner to India at the Ramayan Mela inauguration in New Delhi in 2015, is quoted by *The Fiji Times* (9 March 2015). He reportedly stated:

Ramayana and Ramayana Mandalis have a constructive role in the social fabrics of Fiji for more than 130 years.... [E]very settlement in the country has unique *Ramayana Mandalis* and their recitations on weekly basis help to educate and preserve religion, cultural and heritage in Fiji [S]uch cultural groupings or "*mandalis*" are source of inspiration, especially for the youth.

Apart from cultural engagement, the Ramayan Mandalis provide charity, natural disaster relief assistance and play a critical role in educational, social and cultural development in Fiji. The Ramayan Mandalis in Fiji also help maintaining the transnational engagement, networks and relationships.

Political Development

Fiji's political landscape today could not have been possible without the Fiji-Indians. By the end of indenture in 1920, there was the beginning of the formation of political organisations among Indians in Fiji. In 1911, a group of Fiji-Indians formed the British Indian Association of Fiji. In 1916, Badri Maharaj was nominated by the then Governor to represent the Indian community in the Legislative Council (Ali, 1977).

In the post-indentured period, struggles for equal status continued by the Girmitiyas. In 1929, provision was made for three communally elected Indo-Fijians, along with European and Indigenous Fijian representatives, in the Legislature. This marked the grant of political franchise to Indians. In 1930, Indians raised a demand for a common electoral roll on a one-man-one-vote basis and for equal rights (Kumar, 2012). The Indo-Fijian struggle for their political rights continued into the newly emerging and independent nation of Fiji.

Transnational Fijian- Indian Diaspora

The changing political economy in Fiji since independence led to steady outflow of Indians, mainly of the skilled categories, to the Pacific-Rim countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and USA. The trend accelerated after the 1987 and 2000 coups and the associated political instabilities, and non-renewal of agricultural land leases since 1997 and resulting land insecurity. On average, 5,000 Fiji Indians left annually between 1987 and 1997; most of those leaving were relatively skilled and financially secure individuals. Both push (e.g., political instability and land insecurity) and pull factors (e.g., greener pastures) prompted Indian emigration from Fiji (Mohanty, 2001, 2006).

Today, the Fijian Indians have formed distinct transnational diaspora abroad through secondary and tertiary migration especially in Pacific-Rim metropolitan countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and USA (Mohanty, 2006). The trans-nationalisation of Fijian Indian diaspora has been a rapid process over the last few decades. Lal (2017: 8) noted that the Indo-Fijian diaspora of the *twice banished* is 'increasing daily as people leave Fiji for freedom and opportunity elsewhere'. Today, there are over 170,000 Fijian Indian transnational population, a majority in Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada and United Kingdom (Mohanty, 2020). Australia is home to the largest Fijian Indian diaspora, accounting for one-third of the total Fijian Indian diaspora. This is followed by New Zealand, USA, Canada and the United Kingdom (Mohanty, 2020). A small number of Fijians of Indian descent have also settled in other Pacific Island countries and European countries. They contribute much to the personal remittance receipts in Fiji. During the financial year 2021-2022, the Reserve Bank of Fiji recorded the total personal remittance flow to the country amounting to FJD 951.6 million (The Fiji Times, 28 March 2023). A significant proportion of this is estimated to be from the Fiji Indian diaspora.

Conclusion

The girmitiya period in Fiji was a phase of struggle, misery, exploitation and suffering. The *girmitiyas* gradually transformed into the contemporary Fijian Indian diaspora. During 144 years of existence of *girmitiyas* and 117 years since the arrival of Gujarati community in Fiji, the 'old India-born *girmitiya* diaspora and the 'new' Fijian Indian diaspora have made significant contributions to the development of Fiji, making Fiji, a modern and prosperous nation. While the *girmitiyas* and Fijian Indian diaspora have engaged intensely and contributed significantly to the development of Fiji, their relationships and en-

agement with their original homeland have been relatively limited.

Over the years, the emigration of professional Fijian Indians caused a major shortage of skilled workforce in Fiji. Migration from Fiji as well as a declining fertility rate among Fiji's Indian population, resulted in rapid decline of the Indian origin population in Fiji. This has far-reaching socio-political, economic and development implications, and a challenge to Fiji-Indian diaspora engagement in the development of Fiji.

However, there exists a great potential for the Fijian Indian diaspora's effective engagement in the development of Fiji. To utilise the full potential of the Fiji-Indian diaspora, there is a need to design strategies and policy measures to prevent large-scale emigration of the Fijian Indian population from Fiji, and for their active engagement at home that can contribute to Fiji's growth and development on a sustainable basis.

Glossary

Baboo/Babu - respectful person with high social standing.

Fiji Baat - Fiji talk

iTaukei - Indigenous Fijian

Mandali - Grouping

Narak - Hell

Pratinidhi - Representative

Sabha - Committee

Samaj - Society

Sangha - Organisation/ Association

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Author

Manoranjan Mohanty is Associate Professor in Development Studies, School of Law and Social Sciences at the University of the South Pacific. Email: manoranjan.mohanty@usp.ac.fj