

## Fijian Tertiary Students' Perspectives on Girit

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### *Abstract*

*This paper highlights the relationship between Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the questions pertaining to student perception and awareness of Girit, relevancy, and identity crisis. Maslow's hierarchy provides a framework to understand the significance of addressing students' physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs in relation to their perception and understanding of Girit. The research findings underscore the importance of creating safe spaces for dialogue, promoting visibility of Girit and Giritiya descendants, and incorporating Girit into educational curricula to address students' sense of relevancy and foster a deeper sense of cultural identity. By addressing these needs, educational institutions can support students in their journey towards self-actualization, enabling them to develop a stronger connection with Girit and enhance their overall well-being.*

## Introduction

The Girit system, which originated after the end of slavery and lasted until 1917, transported over 1.2m people from India to work as labourers in various British colonies. Mauritius received over 450,000 such people. British Guyana, South Africa, Trinidad, Fiji and Suriname were other major recipients. The period, known as 'girit' after the word 'agreement' which formed the basis of their engagement, remains an important historical event, symbolizing, inter alia, the struggle, resilience, and cultural identity of the descendants of indentured laborers.

Girit in Fiji's history refers to the indentured labor system that brought Indian laborers to Fiji between 1879 and 1920. These laborers were recruited to work on sugarcane plantations; they signed contracts, often under deceptive terms, binding them to labor for five-year periods. Life for the indentured laborers was gruelling, characterized by harsh working conditions and substandard living conditions, including abuse from overseers. The indenture system officially ceased in 1920.

The descendants of the Giritiya laborers have become an integral part of Fiji's multicultural society, contributing significantly to its cultural diversity. Their cultural heritage persists in Fiji's cuisine, music, dance, and religion. Commemorative efforts and initiatives ensure that the hardships endured during the Girit period are not forgotten, highlighting the resilience and contributions of the Giritiyas in shaping Fiji's history and society.

As future leaders and active members of society, students play a crucial role in shaping the narrative and understanding of Girit. This paper examines the perspectives students have on Girit. Specifically, the research focuses on two key aspects: student awareness and student perception. By understanding these dimensions, the paper sheds some light on how students perceive and engage with Girit. The analysis of student perspectives is grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is useful in providing a framework to understand the importance of addressing students' physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs in relation to their perception of Girit, relevancy, and identity crisis (Poldma, 2016). By acknowledging and addressing these needs, educational institutions can create an environment that supports students' overall well-being and fosters a more meaningful engagement with Girit.

Two basis research questions were addressed: (a) what is the level of awareness among students regarding the Girit system, and (b) how do students perceive Girit in terms of its historical significance, cultural identity,

and impact on their own lives?

**Methodology**

The methods used to collect the data were surveys and interviews. A survey questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data on student awareness and perception of Girmit. The survey consisted of multiple-choice questions, Likert scale items, and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 70 university students in Fiji. The selection of participants was based on a simple random sampling technique, ensuring a diverse representation of students from different disciplines and backgrounds (Burge, 2022). In-depth interviews were conducted with a select number of participants (10) from the survey to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives on Girmit. These interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely. The participants for the interviews were purposively selected based on their survey responses to ensure a range of viewpoints and experiences. The number of interviews conducted was chosen as ten as it was the point of data saturation, where no new information or themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from the survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, and means, to examine the level of student awareness and perception of Girmit. Qualitative data from the interviews was transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach involved identifying patterns, themes, and categories within the data to understand the nuanced perspectives of the participants. The analysis was conducted manually, organizing the data into codes and themes based on iterative readings and discussions among the researchers.

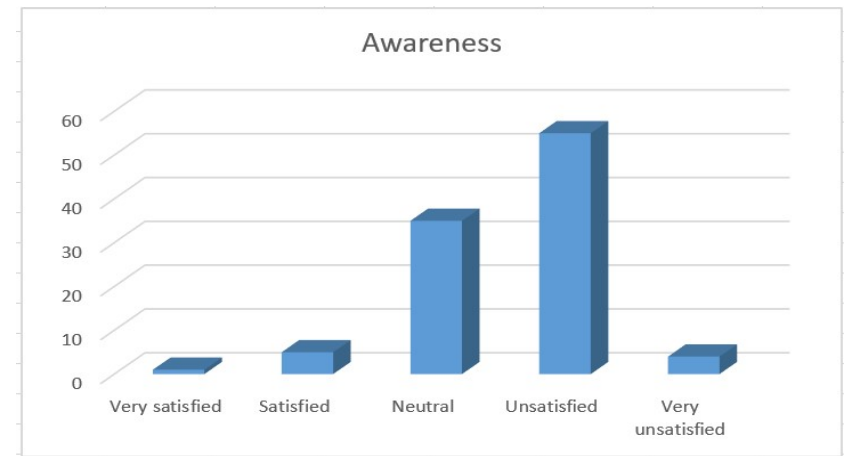
**Ethical Considerations and Limitations**

This research prioritized ethical considerations by obtaining informed consent from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants was maintained throughout the study. Researchers also ensured that participants' identities were protected when reporting and disseminating the findings. Any personal or sensitive information shared during the interviews or focus group discussion was treated with utmost respect and confidentiality.

This study's limitations include the relatively small sample size of university students and the potential for self-selection bias among participants. Additionally, the findings may be limited to the specific context and university setting being studied. However, efforts were made to ensure diversity within the sample to capture a range of perspectives (Singh, 2022)

**Results and Discussion: Student Awareness of Girmit**

The research findings indicate that most students were unsatisfied with their awareness of Girmit. 52% were unsatisfied with their awareness of Girmit whereas 3% were satisfied and 0.5% were very satisfied. Based on the research findings, the student awareness of Girmit was found to be limited and characterized by the few key observations. The following chart provides the details on student awareness.



Students generally possessed a vague understanding of what Girmit was but lacked detailed knowledge of specific aspects such as the timeline and personal stories of indentured laborers. A student who was interviewed, for example, was aware of the dates of Girmit but didn't know any stories and had not read or been exposed to any literature on Girmit. Their awareness was based on a general notion rather than comprehensive knowledge. Students had limited exposure on this subject. Student awareness of Girmit came primarily from their secondary school education and occasional external events or activities

related to the topic. However, the depth of knowledge was limited, indicating a lack of extensive exposure to the subject matter.

The limited awareness of Girmit among students was attributed to a lack of intergenerational dialogue. There seemed to be a gap in communication between older generations, who may have had a more direct connection to Girmit, and the younger generation. This has hindered the transmission of knowledge and personal stories, contributing to the students' limited understanding. The absence of safe spaces for open and meaningful discussions around potentially triggering topics, such as Girmit, was identified as a factor limiting student awareness. The sensitive nature of Girmit, involving historical trauma and exploitation, may have created reluctance or discomfort in engaging in conversations about it. The need for safety and security is crucial for individuals to feel stable and protected. In the context of the questions raised, creating safe spaces for dialogue and engagement on potentially triggering topics related to Girmit is essential. By providing a secure and non-judgmental environment, students can freely express their perceptions, navigate identity concerns, and develop a sense of belonging (Akinwoya, 2022).

Comparative awareness between the Girmit and other historical movement was also revealing. Interestingly, the research revealed that while students had limited knowledge of Girmit, they demonstrated some awareness of other historical movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the history of African American slavery. A student interviewed explained that the BLM movement was more relevant today as there were more people engaging in discussion about it and it was considered cool to talk about it. He also explained that there was simply more information available on social media about it and as a result he knew much more about it. This discrepancy highlighted the need for a more comprehensive understanding of historical events beyond the immediate context.

These findings underscore the importance of creating educational opportunities and safe spaces for students to engage in meaningful dialogue, learn about the specificities of Girmit, and understand its historical significance. By addressing the gaps in student awareness, universities and educational institutions can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Girmit and its relevance within a broader historical context.

### **Results and Discussion: Student Perception Girmit**

The research reveals a general trend of student indifference towards Girmit. A significant majority of students (73% of the respondents), perceive

themselves as indifferent to Girmit in the context of its historical and cultural significance. This suggests a lack of active engagement or emotional connection with this historical event.

Approximately 16% of students expressed positive perceptions, indicating a recognition of Girmit's historical importance, cultural identity, or its impact on their own lives or communities.

11% of the students expressed negative perceptions on Girmit. This suggested a critical view of Girmit, possibly due to its association with historical trauma or exploitation. A student interviewed explained that he did not want to be perceived as a victim and that Girmit had no importance today.

Two central themes emerged from the data analysis: relevance and identity crisis. The relevance of Girmit in contemporary times was a significant theme among students. Some students perceived Girmit as lacking relevance to their present lives and societal context, leading to indifference. The historical event's perceived distance in time and its limited inclusion in educational curricula may contribute to this perception. A student commented that Girmit has no relevance to his current life and it was only the older people who were still hung up on the past. This highlights the need to emphasize the relevance of Girmit and its enduring impact on society to enhance student engagement and understanding. The youthful-character of the students, coupled with the generational gap, emerged as influential factors in their perception of Girmit.

The lack of awareness and limited dialogue surrounding Girmit, especially in educational settings, contributed to their limited understanding of its historical and cultural significance.

This, combined with the rapidly changing political climate, left students susceptible to identity loss and crisis. Self-actualization is the highest level of Maslow's hierarchy, representing the fulfilment of one's potential and the desire for personal growth and meaning (Lal, 2015). The research findings highlight a lack of relevancy and connection among students in relation to Girmit. By promoting dialogue, education, and cultural integration, educational institutions can help students develop a deeper understanding of Girmit's historical and cultural significance.

This understanding can contribute to their self-actualization by fostering a sense of purpose, connection, and personal growth.

The theme of identity crisis emerged as students grappled with their connection to Girmit and its cultural heritage. Some students expressed feelings of disconnection or a lack of personal identification with Girmit, potentially due to limited knowledge of their own ancestry or the absence of a strong cultural link. This identity crisis suggests a need for fostering a sense of belonging and cultural identity among students with Girmit heritage. Many students reported

feeling a sense of not belonging – that of being *neither here nor there*. They struggled with their cultural identity and found it challenging to reconcile their heritage with their present reality.

The concept of names and labelling emerged as significant factors in shaping their identity, as students recognized that how they label themselves and how others label them can deeply impact their sense of self. For Girmitya descendants, the process of labelling is often unpredictable and subject to changes in government policies, further contributing to their sense of identity crisis.

This occupation of a ‘liminal space’ (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2015) caught between multiple cultural identities, leaves students with a feeling of limited ownership of their country and a desire to migrate upon graduation. The absence of a sense of connection, which is vital for self-actualization according to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, was notably lacking among the surveyed students. Belongingness and love need involve the desire for social connections, acceptance, and a sense of belonging to a community or group (Chand, 2020).

The identity crisis highlighted in the research points to a lack of belongingness and challenges in reconciling cultural heritage with present reality. Addressing this need requires promoting dialogue, visibility, and community engagement that fosters a sense of connection and acceptance for Girmitya descendant.

### Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the need for comprehensive educational initiatives and dialogue platforms that address the relevancy and significance of Girmitya in students’ lives. It is crucial to bridge the generational gap and create safe spaces for open and meaningful discussions on Girmitya, allowing students to explore their cultural identity and foster a sense of connection.

Efforts should be made to provide accurate and accessible information about Girmitya, dispelling misconceptions and promoting a deeper understanding of its historical context and cultural significance. Educational institutions should consider incorporating more Girmitya related content into their curricula, engaging with community organizations, and organizing cultural events to encourage students to embrace their heritage and develop a stronger sense of belonging. (Millikan, 2017).

The following recommendations are proposed to address the issues of relevancy and identity crisis. Open and honest dialogue should be encouraged in context to Girmitya in both personal and public spheres (Apter, 2021). This

can be achieved through organized discussions, forums, and events that provide a safe and inclusive space for students to express their thoughts, share their experiences, and engage in meaningful conversations about Girmitya.

The visibility of Girmitya and Girmitya descendants needs to be increased through various platforms and mediums. This can be done through exhibitions, conferences, cultural festivals, online campaigns, and the incorporation of Girmitya-related content in mainstream media. By showcasing the significance of Girmitya and the contributions of Girmitya descendants, students can develop a stronger sense of connection and appreciation for their heritage.

Safe spaces also need to be created. Establishment of dedicated spaces within educational institutions and communities where students can safely engage in potentially triggering topics related to Girmitya is needed. These spaces should be inclusive, respectful, and guided by trained facilitators who can facilitate productive discussions and provide support when needed (The Roestone Collective 2014). This would allow students to explore their emotions, ask questions, and gain a deeper understanding of Girmitya without fear of judgment or discomfort.

Girmitya history and relevance needs to be incorporated in primary, secondary, and university curricula. Integrating Girmitya-related topics into subjects such as history, social studies, and cultural studies to ensure comprehensive coverage is essential. This inclusion should go beyond information and emphasize the cultural, social, and economic impacts of Girmitya. By integrating Girmitya into curricula, students will have the opportunity to develop a more nuanced understanding and appreciation for this significant historical event.

Collaboration and partnerships between educational institutions, community organizations, and cultural associations to promote awareness and understanding of Girmitya also needs to be encouraged. By working together, these stakeholders can organize workshops, seminars, and cultural events that celebrate Girmitya and facilitate dialogue among students, educators, community members, and Girmitya descendants. This collective effort enhances the learning experience and provides a broader perspective on Girmitya.

Professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their knowledge and understanding of Girmitya also needs to be provided. Offering training sessions, workshops, and resources that equip educators with the necessary tools to effectively teach Girmitya-related topics is critical. By empowering educators, they can guide students in exploring Girmitya in a sensitive, accurate, and engaging manner.

The recommendations suggested here can foster a deeper understanding, relevance, and appreciation of Girmitya among students in educational institutions. These efforts will not only address the issues of relevancy and identity

crisis but also contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of inclusivity within society (Mishra, 2023).

## Conclusion

These paper underscores the importance of creating educational opportunities and safe spaces for students to engage in meaningful dialogue, learn about the specificities of Girit, and understand its historical significance. By addressing the gaps in student awareness, universities and educational institutions can contribute to a more relevant understanding of Girit and its significance within a broader historical context. This paper highlights the limited student awareness of Girit, characterized by a vague understanding and a lack of specific knowledge on this vital part of Fiji's history. By comparing students' awareness of Girit with their awareness of other historical movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement and African American slavery, the study emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive understanding of Girit within the broader historical narrative. Creating platforms for intergenerational dialogue and safe spaces for open discussions can contribute to a more nuanced appreciation of Girit's historical significance and its enduring impact on affected communities. The research findings indicate a general trend of student indifference towards Girit. The themes of relevance and identity crisis emerged as central to students' perception of Girit. Addressing these themes through educational initiatives, intergenerational dialogue, and cultural engagement can enhance students' understanding, appreciation, and personal connection to Girit. By promoting a more comprehensive and meaningful engagement with Girit, educational institutions can contribute to a deeper appreciation of this significant historical event and its impact on contemporary Fijian society.

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