International Journal Research Publication Analysis

GIRMITIYA CULTURE: THE BEDROCK OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN THE MAURITIAN FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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The journey towards Mauritian independence, formally achieved on 12 March 1968, is often narrated through the frameworks of constitutional conferences, the rise of political parties, and the pivotal role of visionary leaders like Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. However, beneath this political superstructure lay a profound socio-cultural foundation that sustained, inspired, and directed the struggle: the culture of the *Girmitiya*s. The term *Girmitiya*, derived from the Hindi word 'girmit' (an indigenised corruption of the English 'agreement'), refers specifically to the indentured labourers who embarked from British India to far-flung colonies under a system of fixed-term contracts after the abolition of slavery. Between 1834 and the early 20th century, nearly half a million of these labourers arrived in Mauritius, the first and a major recipient of this diaspora. Theirs was a culture forged in the crucible of trauma uprooted from homeland, subjected to the *kala pani* (black waters) voyage, and thrust into a brutal plantation regime. Yet, from this experience, they created a resilient, syncretic, and assertive cultural world. This article argues that *Girmitiya* culture was not a mere backdrop to the freedom struggle but its essential substratum, providing the tools for community preservation, fostering a collective consciousness that transcended narrow identities, and evolving into explicit platforms for political mobilisation and anti-colonial resistance. The struggle for freedom in Mauritius was, in a fundamental sense, a struggle for the recognition and rightful place of the *Girmitiya* legacy.

To understand its political potency, one must first comprehend the nature of *Girmitiya* culture itself. It was not a static transplant of Indian traditions, but a dynamic process of bricolage a creative assembly from available resources under conditions of extreme duress.[1] The labourers hailed from diverse regions of North India (present-day Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and surrounding areas), speaking *Bhojpuri, Awadhi*, and other dialects, and belonging to varied

Hindu castes and Muslim communities. The depersonalising violence of the plantation, or *latabazi*, and the shared space of the camps des noirs (labour lines) necessitated a cultural fusion.

Language and Orality A critical unifying element was the evolution of a Mauritian Bhojpuri koiné, a simplified, blended dialect that became the lingua franca of the *batika* (estate) communities.[2] This was not the pure Bhojpuri of the subcontinent but a language infused with Creole, French, and English words, reflecting the new reality. Through this linguistic medium, a rich oral culture flourished. *Bhajans* (devotional songs), *birhas* (sung narratives of love, separation, and social commentary), and *kathas* (recitations of epics) became vessels of memory, emotion, and covert critique.[3] A *birha* lamenting the hardship of the *sardar* (overseer) or the pain of separation from *des* (homeland) was not just folk art; it was a chronicle of collective suffering and a subtle protest against the plantation order.

Religion and Syncretism Religious practice became a cornerstone of identity and solidarity. The construction of modest *kalimais* (prayer houses) and later more elaborate temples and mosques provided sacred, autonomous spaces away from the planter's gaze. The worship of *Mariyamman* (a South Indian goddess of disease and protection) and *Hanuman* (symbolising strength and devotion) gained prominence, speaking directly to the labourers' needs for health and resilience.[4] Crucially, a process of syncretism occurred. Hindu and Muslim indentured labourers, living in close quarters, often participated in each other's festivals. The *Muharram* processions (known as *Taziya* or *Ghoon* in Mauritius) became spectacular, cross-community events, transforming into a public assertion of presence and cultural pride in a colonial landscape dominated by Franco-Mauritian and Creole symbols.[5]

Festivals and Communal Bonds: Festivals like *Holi* (spring festival), *Diwali* (festival of lights), and *Eid* were reinvented in the Mauritian context. They served as occasions for communal gathering, reaffirmation of kinship networks (*jat* and *bhai-chara*), and the distribution of scarce resources. The preparation and sharing of foods like *rotis, biryani,* and *laddu* became acts of cultural preservation and mutual aid. These practices forged a "plantation proto-community," a sense of solidarity that was initially localised to the estate

but gradually expanded into a broader "Indian" consciousness in opposition to the colonial and planter class.[6]

This culture was, from its inception, one of resilience and quiet resistance. The very act of maintaining linguistic, religious, and culinary traditions was a defiance of the planters' attempts to deculturate and control a purely productive labour force. The culture provided a psychological sanctuary and a framework for understanding their plight, often through epic narratives of exile, struggle, and eventual justice (like the Ramayana). This internal world of meaning was the prerequisite for any future external political action.

The transition from a culture of survival to one of political assertion was gradual and channeled through specific institutions. The first major conduit was education. In the late 19th century, Hindu and Muslim reformers, often from the emerging petty-bourgeoisie class of traders and clerks, began establishing vernacular schools. Figures like Manilall Doctor (a Gujarati barrister sent by Mahatma Gandhi in 1907) and R. K. Boodhun were instrumental.[7] These schools did more than teach Hindi, Urdu, and arithmetic; they became centres for discussing identity, rights, and the situation in India. They fostered a literate class that could engage with ideas of the Indian nationalist movement and later articulate local grievances.

The Press and Literary Awakening The early 20th century saw the rise of a vibrant vernacular press. Newspapers like The Hindustani, The Indian, and later Advance (founded by Dr. Maurice Curé but with significant Indian support) became platforms for airing grievances against indenture, advocating for civil rights, and forging links with the Indian National Congress.[8] Literary societies, such as the Arya Samaj (which promoted a reformist Hinduism) and the Sanatan Dharma organisations, while religious in focus, played a crucial civic role. They organised debates, published pamphlets, and created networks that transcended individual estates, fostering a pan-Mauritian Indian public sphere.[9]

The Campaign against Indenture The first major political mobilisation rooted in *Girmitiya* consciousness was the movement for the abolition of the indenture system itself. The horrors of the system symbolised by the 1911 "Protest of the Ghunghroo (ankle bells)" where female labourers protested abusive treatment were widely reported.[10] The Mauritian Indian leadership, drawing moral authority from the suffering of the labouring masses and leveraging connections with Indian nationalists like Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Mahatma

Gandhi, lobbied relentlessly. Gandhi's denunciation of indenture as "a remnant of slavery" resonated deeply.[11] When the British Imperial government finally abolished the system in 1920, it was a monumental victory. It demonstrated to the Indo-Mauritian community the power of organised pressure, of linking local struggle to a wider imperial discourse, and of using their cultural identity as a political tool. The end of indenture marked the transformation of the *Girmitiya* from a temporary contractual figure into a permanent, rooted citizen with a stake in the colony's future.

Labour Unrest and Cultural Expression Parallel to this, the interwar period saw significant labour unrest on the sugar estates. Strikes and protests in 1925, 1937, and 1938, while driven by economic demands (wages, working conditions), were deeply imbued with *Girmitiya* cultural idioms.[12] Protestors used folk songs and religious symbols to mobilise and legitimise their actions. Leaders emerged from within the labouring class, able to speak its cultural language. This period saw the beginning of an alliance between the emerging educated political elite and the labouring masses, an alliance cemented by shared cultural roots. The 1937 strikes, brutally suppressed, were a turning point, proving that the economic struggle was inseparable from the political one for dignity and representation.

The Second World War acted as a profound accelerant. Mauritius became a strategic British base, bringing economic changes and exposing its population to global currents of thought, including the Atlantic Charter's promise of self-determination. The returning Mauritian soldiers, many of Indo-Mauritian origin, had seen a wider world and were less willing to accept colonial subservience.[13] Crucially, India's own independence movement was reaching its climax, electrifying the Indo-Mauritian community. News of the Quit India Movement, the heroism of figures like Subhas Chandra Bose, and the impending birth of an independent India in 1947 created an immense psychological shift.

Culture as a Mobilising Force In this charged atmosphere, *Girmitiya* culture became explicitly politicised. Indian patriotic films from Bombay flooded Mauritian cinemas, becoming sites of mass emotional rallying.[14] Songs like "Vande Mataram" and "Sare Jahan Se Achha" were sung in cultural gatherings. The celebration of Indian festivals, especially Dīwālī and *Holi*, took on a new dimension: they became public and confident displays of a community's strength and its connection to a soon-to-be-free motherland. This cultural confidence directly fed political confidence.

The Rise of Political Parties and Cultural Base The post-war period saw the formation of modern political parties. The Labour Party, founded in 1936 by Dr. Maurice Curé and later led by Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, found its most solid base of support among the Indo-Mauritian working class and rural peasantry the direct descendants of the *Girmitiya*s.[15] Ramgoolam, a man of humble *Girmitiya* origins who studied medicine in England, was the perfect embodiment of this fusion. He was deeply rooted in the Bhojpuri folk culture, but also a sophisticated political operator in the Westminster system.[16] The Labour Party's rallies were not merely political meetings; they were cultural events featuring bhajan mandalis, folk singers, and references to epic stories. The party machinery worked through temple committees, cultural associations, and village networks that were the living tissue of *Girmitiya* society.

The Hindu Maha Sabha and Muslim Committees: Alongside the multi-ethnic but Indo-dominated Labour Party, organisations like the Hindu Maha Sabha and various Muslim Committees played a dual role. They defended the specific cultural and religious interests of their constituencies (e.g., securing time for Hindi and Urdu on the new radio service, advocating for religious *holi*days) while also engaging in the broader nationalist struggle, often aligning with the Labour Party's push for constitutional reform and universal suffrage.[17] The ascent of Indo-Mauritian political power, rooted in *Girmitiya* demography and culture, inevitably provoked a counter-mobilisation from other communities, primarily the Franco-Mauritian elite and a significant section of the Creole population. This opposition often framed itself in cultural terms, presenting the Indo-Mauritian drive for political representation as an attempt at "Hindu domination" or "Indianisation" of the island.[18]

The Creole Identity and Malaise Créole For many Creoles (descendants of enslaved Africans and others), their own culture a blend of African, European, and insular elements was perceived as the authentic "Mauritian" culture. The public, assertive presence of *Girmitiya* culture, coupled with its demographic and political rise, created what scholars term the malaise créole.[19] Some Creole leaders and the Franco-Mauritian-supported Parti Mauricien (later PMSD) of Gaëtan Duval portrayed themselves as defenders of a "European" or "Creole" Mauritius against an "Asian" influx. Duval consciously crafted a "populist-Mediterranean" style (flashy suits, championing séga music) as a cultural counterpoint to the perceived "traditionalism" of Indo-Mauritian culture.[20]

The Language Debate This cultural-political battle was crystallised in the fierce debate over the national language in the pre-independence constitutional conferences. The Labour Party, backed by the Hindu Maha Sabha, advocated for Hindi to be given official status, arguing it was the language of the majority's ancestral culture. This was fiercely opposed by others who saw English (as a neutral imperial language) and French (the language of the elite and media) as the only viable options. The conflict was so intense it nearly derailed independence talks. The eventual compromise English as official, French protected, and ancestral languages (Hindi, Urdu, Bhojpuri, etc.) promoted culturally was a testament to how deeply culture was entangled with the struggle for power.[21] The language debate was not just about communication; it was about whose history and identity would be centred in the new nation. The final push for independence in the 1960s, culminating in the 1967 elections and independence in 1968, saw *Girmitiya* cultural motifs deployed with full force. The Labour Party's campaign was a masterclass in ethno-cultural mobilisation. It invoked the suffering and sacrifice of the *Girmitiya*s as the moral foundation for claiming political power. Slogans, speeches, and posters linked the concept of swaraj (self-rule, from the Indian struggle) with the promise of land reform, education, and dignity for the sugar cane workers and small planters the "*malbar*" (a local term for Indo-Mauritian labourers).[22]

The 1967 Elections: A Cultural Referendum The hotly contested 1967 election, effectively a referendum on independence, was fought along stark communal-cultural lines. The Labour Party- Independence Alliance's victory was a victory for the political project borne out of the *Girmitiya* experience. It validated the decades-long journey from cultural preservation to political sovereignty. On Independence Day, 12 March 1968, the celebrations across the island were infused with *Girmitiya* symbols: Hindu prayers (*pujas*), the lighting of *diyas* (earthen lamps), and the singing of folk songs alongside the new national anthem.

Post-Independence: From Resistance to Heritage After independence, *Girmitiya* culture transitioned from a culture of resistance to a cornerstone of national heritage. The state, under successive Labour Party governments, actively institutionalised it. Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI) and the Mauritius Institute of Education were established to promote Indian languages, arts, and studies.[23] Aapravasi Ghat, the immigration depot in Port Louis where indentured labourers first arrived, was preserved (and later declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006) as the foundational site of the nation's modern history a powerful act

of placing the *Girmitiya* narrative at the centre of the national story.[24] Festivals like Dīwālī and *Holi* were declared public *holi*days, recognising their centrality to Mauritian life.

The freedom struggle of Mauritius, we see, was a multi-layered process involving constitutional negotiation, economic aspiration, and elite politics. However, to view it solely through these lenses is to miss its soul. The engine of this struggle, the source of its moral legitimacy and its mass mobilising power, was the living culture of the *Girmitiya*s. From the *birhas* sung in the labour lines to the *Taziya* processions claiming public space, from the vernacular schools preserving language to the temple committees organising votes, *Girmitiya* culture provided the tools for community survival, the framework for a collective identity, and ultimately, the platforms for political action.

It fostered a consciousness that moved from the local (*jat*, estate) to the communal (Indian) and finally to the national (Mauritian), all while retaining its distinctive character. It empowered a community to transform its narrative of victimhood into one of agency, its experience of indenture into a claim for citizenship and, finally, self-government. The leaders of the independence movement were effective precisely because they could speak the cultural language of this world, translating its deep-seated yearning for dignity and justice into a political programme.

In contemporary Mauritius, the *Girmitiya* legacy remains potent, a subject of academic study, artistic expression, and sometimes political contestation. It stands as a powerful testament to how the most oppressed communities can forge, from the fragments of trauma, a culture of immense resilience a culture that does not merely reflect political change but actively drives it. The freedom of Mauritius was won not only in the halls of Lancaster House but in the *kalimais*, the *baitkas*, and the hearts of those who remembered the girmit, and decided its legacy would be one of freedom, not bondage.

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