Indentured diaspora (*Girmit*) in Mauritius: Histories, legacies, and contemporary implications

Dharmveer Singh Yadav and Vinita Mohindra[*]

Abstract: This paper explores the history and impact of Indian indentured labour migration to Mauritius during the 19th and early 20th centuries. After the abolition of slavery, British colonial authorities introduced the indenture system to meet labour demands on sugar plantations. The paper examines how workers from North and South India entered the system through recruitment processes that often involved deception and coercion. It describes their daily lives, characterized by strict regulations, limited freedoms, and racial discrimination. Despite these hardships, many labourers formed new communities, preserved cultural traditions, and contributed significantly to the development of modern Mauritian society. The study also looks at how places like *Aapravasi Ghat* commemorate the history of indenture and how these historical connections continue to shape Mauritius's identity today. By highlighting both the exploitation and resilience of indentured laborers, the paper illustrates their central role in the island's colonial and postcolonial history.

Keywords: indentured labourers, Indian diaspora, colonial labour migration, Aapravasi Ghat

Introduction

Indenture, as a historical phenomenon, cannot be understood merely as the aftermath of slavery or as a transitional mode of labour. It must be approached as a structure of power, mobility, and racialized governance embedded within the broader logics of colonial capitalism. In the case of Mauritius, indentured migration became a key site where imperial systems of control intersected with the personal struggles of dislocated bodies. Yet, beyond its economic function, indenture produced a complex repertoire of memory, kinship, and resistance

[*] Dharmveer Singh Yadav; Vinita Mohindra (✉)
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Maulana Azad National Institute of Technology, Bhopal, India
e-mail: dharma22012@gmail.com (corresponding author)

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what Paul Ricoeur might call 'the poetics of memory' and what Michel Foucault would trace as the microphysics of power. The Indo-Mauritian experience, emerging from this entangled past, reveals how diasporic identities are not just forged by movement but also by the layered processes of negotiation with land, law, and legacy. This essay draws upon material culture, and critical historiography to argue that the indenture system in Mauritius generated a unique archive of cultural and political subjectivity one that continues to shape the island's national consciousness and diasporic imagination. Indians were recruited as indentured labourers during the 19th and early 20th centuries and transported to distant colonial territories such as British Guiana, Mauritius, Trinidad and Natal, Suriname, and Fiji both the recipient nations and the Indian subcontinent were significantly impacted by these migrations. By fusing their country's customs with the realities of their new surroundings, the *Girmitiyas* established new communities, profoundly changing the social and cultural landscapes of these areas. The term *girmit*, a slang term meaning agreement, which refers to the contracts they signed for fixed-term labour, is whence *Girmitiyas* got their name. Through the description of their lives, the cultural and social changes brought about by their relocation and displacement are highlighted. As we see, readers would be reminded of the fortitude and flexibility of these early migrants by the particularly potent tales of agency and resiliency. Their long legacy is demonstrated by the way their experiences continue to influence modern diasporic identities (Khan 2024). The beginning of *Girmitiyas* is itself a beginning of a new world of slavery. This historical record of girmitiyascan be traced back on the date of 9th September 1834. On this say the very first 36 Indians extremely poor by economy and ruined by the future were caught by some *arkatias* (recruiters) in Calcutta. They were asked if they would be willing to emigrate to Mauritius in the hope of good fortune. This would be possible if they would agree on certain conditions and signed it on. They would be working on a period of 5 years or 10 years accordingly to their agreement. They were convinced in such a manner that they would be collecting money and digging gold from the island called then *miritchdvip*, just situated not so far from Bengal coast. These people agreed on this because they had already in Calcutta in the hope of work and all they needed is the work. Then they were made to appear before the chief magistrate of Calcutta Police Court, who would probably read out in a language they were alien to get their thumb on the agreement

paper. After seeing no objection from them and signed documents, they were authorised for emigration from Calcutta to Mauritius. These men became the torchbearers of over a million indentured labourers who left India for 82 years destined to different British colonies across the continents. Most of them were from North India, some from the unprosperous region of Chhota Nagpur plateau and Bihar in 1860s then also from Eastern United Provinces in the 1970s onwards. Most of them were economically coerced and represented lower class strata in the rural North Indian society. These people were the first victims of economic vicissitudes and victims of natural calamities. In those also migration was not new to the Indian people, for it was seen that even in pre-modern era they would move from one place to other in search of better living. This would happen due to the droughts, floods and also the constant depredation of taxes by the ruling authorities. The only difference would be seen that this migration would be within the Indian subcontinent and indenture would be beyond the physical boundaries of the subcontinent (Lal 2000, 99-101). The British colonial authorities attempted to prove that indenture system was not the form of slavery but an attempt of their employment and to protect the interests of indentured. On the contrary to this fact the indenture system remained inherently oppressive (Mishra 2009, 233). Now we will see that how the system of indenture promoted its emigration from the subcontinent, which in turn limited the mobility of the labourers. The colonial authorities made some changes and started recruiting them in a controlled mechanism. This became more strictly and moved towards the form of bond slavery. It was also seen earlier that many of them, were compelled to leave their native place and also because of their financial difficulties which made people believe that they had enrolled into the system voluntarily. But throughout the hiring process, some people also fell prey to 'deception and subterfuge.' Stories of kidnapping and deceit were common, and there is proof of many types of malpractice and abuse in the hiring process. Some were duped into believing they were 'in the Company service, doing Government work,' and they would not have enrolled if they had known differently (Anderson 2009, 99).

Informal networks of local recruiters such as *kanganis* in the South and *arkatias* in the North played a crucial role as intermediaries in the recruitment of low-income Indians under the indenture system. These middlemen were central to the colonial labour supply mechanism, operating as the first link between impoverished villagers and the

global circuits of indentured migration. However, the recruitment practices soon revealed two primary motives of the British colonial authorities: first, to establish an efficient system for mobilizing labour from the subcontinent, and second, to ensure the steady fulfilment of labour demands in the colonies even if it meant resorting to deceptive and coercive practices such as kidnapping and fraud. These methods, while effective in maintaining the supply chain, significantly tarnished the image of the indenture system. The credibility of indentureship came under increasing scrutiny, fueling campaigns by anti-indenture lobbies that condemned its exploitative nature and called for its abolition. The recruitment phase was identified as the most vulnerable point of misuse within the indenture system. Although colonial authorities later formalized recruitment, establishing a bureaucratic framework with officially appointed agents and sub-agents, the potential for abuse persisted. These agents operated through a hierarchized structure: recruiting from rural districts, assembling groups at nodal transit points, transporting them to the port of Calcutta, and finally overseeing their embarkation to overseas colonies. In theory, these agents bore the responsibility of ensuring that all emigrants were voluntarily migrating and were adequately informed about their destinations and the nature of their employment. In practice, however, the gap between policy and execution was stark, with many recruits being misled or inadequately prepared for the hardships ahead. The geographic origins of indentured labourers within India were varied, although over time, certain regional patterns became prominent. Initially, recruitment was concentrated in the northern parts of the subcontinent, particularly Bihar and the eastern districts of what was then the United Provinces. The primary source districts in Bihar included Chhapra, Shahabad, Champaran, Gaya, and Patna. In Uttar Pradesh, the districts of Varanasi, Ghazipur, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Basti, Bahraich, and Jaunpur emerged as significant recruitment zones. Over the decades, recruitment extended to the tribal belts in Eastern India and eventually reached the southern and western parts of the subcontinent. In the south, areas such as Chingleput, Tanjore, Trichinopoly, North and South Arcot, Salem, Coimbatore, and Visakhapatnam became key catchment areas. Similarly, the coastal Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra also emerged as a notable source of indentured labour (Mishra 2009). In the early phase of the indenture system, the emigrants represented a mixed group from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Over time, however, a regional

pattern of destination-based preference began to emerge. Labourers from North India particularly from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh were predominantly dispatched to colonies such as Mauritius, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Malaya (Malaysia), and Burma (Myanmar). On the other hand, indentured workers from southern India were primarily sent to Fiji, British Guiana (Guyana), and the colony of Natal (in present-day South Africa). These patterns were shaped both by colonial administrative preferences and by the evolving labour demands of the plantation economies in each destination (Ibidem).

Historical background and the rise of indenture

The abolition of slavery in the British Empire inadvertently gave rise to another exploitative system indentureship. In Mauritius, slavery formally ended in 1838, but as early as the 1820s and 1830s, colonial planters had begun sourcing long-term contract labour from India to fill the vacuum. Though a minor percentage of indentured labourers came from China, Southeast Asia, and parts of Africa, the majority were recruited from the Indian subcontinent. Between 1834 and 1909, an estimated 452,000 indentured labourers arrived in Mauritius, many of them men, women, and children. The transformation of Mauritius into a major sugar-producing colony coincided with global economic shifts. The demand for sugar surged after Britain removed trade restrictions in 1825 that had previously protected Caribbean sugar. Following two consecutive hurricanes in 1824 that devastated other crops such as coffee and cloves, Mauritian planters turned to sugarcane as a more resilient agricultural commodity. By the 1860s, nearly 20% of the island's cultivable land was covered with sugarcane, and Mauritius emerged as the leading sugar-producing colony, contributing over 6% of global output (Allen 1999).

Theoretical framework and methodology

Mauritius occupies a central role in global migration, notably in the history of indentured labourers for sugar plantation and agricultural pursuits. The abolition of slavery in 1833, inaugurated a vast and sustained experiment as indentured labourer. Khal Torabully's *Voices from the Aapravasi Ghat: Indentured Imaginaries* provides a poignant reconsideration of indenture history, offering a nuanced reinterpretation of the intricate dynamics of indentureship. His work foregrounds the diversities of ethnicities within the indentured diaspora, thereby contributing to the richness of Mauritius' cultural

tapestry. Over time, Mauritius evolved into a bustling hub for commerce, trade, and diplomacy, shaped profoundly by its diasporic communities. Today, the descendants of Indian indentured labourers who constitute nearly 65 percent of the population are widely recognized for their industrious ethos and progressive vision. This study situates Indian ethnicity and diaspora within Mauritius' socio-cultural fabric and considers its broader ramification on global migration history.

The analysis is grounded in a multi-theoretical framework that situates indenture as both a product of empire and a site of cultural creativity. Using the postcolonial theory and Michel Foucault's notions of discipline and power, the study interprets the indenture system not as a natural labour contract but as a mechanism of surveillance and regulation of migrant bodies. The archival sources including colonial registers, ordinances, and administrative correspondence are used to reconstruct recruitment practices and plantation discipline. To counterbalance the colonial archive, the research draws upon James C. Scott's theory of everyday resistance, emphasizing how indentured workers resisted domination through subtle acts such as desertion, cultural persistence, or reworking of religious practices. The subaltern studies provide an additional lens, directing attention to silences in the colonial record and privileging the fragmented voices of indentured. The cultural and memorial dimensions of indenture are approached through Memory Studies, particularly Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de memoire* and Marianne Hirsch's theory of post-memory. The *Aapravasi Ghat* is thus examined not merely as a historical site but as a living repository of collective memory, where rituals, commemorations, and oral narratives continue to transmit the legacies of indentureship across generations.

Methodologically, the research employs textual analysis of literature, and ethnography of everyday cultural practices, illustrative how the descendants of indentured Indians negotiate belonging within a multi-ethnic society. Finally, the study adopts a comparative historical approach by situating Mauritius such as Trinidad, British Guiana, and Fiji. By combining these theoretical frameworks with archival, ethnographic, and comparative methods, this inquiry does more than reconstruct a labor migration history. It interrogates the structures of domination, strategies of resistance, practices of memory, and diasporic transformations that continue to shape Mauritius today.

It positions Mauritius as both a microcosm of colonial modernity and a vital node in the global history of migration and diaspora.

The diversity of indentured in Mauritius

'By the sweat of their brows, their trials, tribulations, toils and tears, the indentured labourers transformed the British colonies (including Mauritius, the first indentured colony)…. They are our ancestors, we carry their names, their blood flows through our veins, they form an integral part of our origins and identities, our history is a continuation of their history…as we are their inheritors.' (*V.S. Naipaul*, descendant and great scholar of indenture, born in Trinidad). The initiative of indenture was private and controlled by British planters and Franco-Mauritians from January 1826 to December 1842. During this period, it is estimated that 1,751 indentured labourers arrived in Mauritius under five-year contracts, primarily working on sugar estates, and a few in Port Louis (Peerthum 2017). According to records at the Mahatma Gandhi Indian Immigration Archives and the Mauritius National Archives, the first Indian indentured labourer to arrive in Mauritius was a 45-year-old Bengali Muslim named Mahomod (or Mohameth), who landed with his two sons, Ali and Hamad, on 23 January 1826. Hailing from Birali village on the outskirts of Calcutta, he was recruited by Captain Gaston of the colonial government to serve Mr. Oliver, a British manager at Gaillardon's Company, at Pointe aux Piments Estate. By 1836, Mahamod was employed as a head servant in Captain West's household, and in 1839, he purchased three arpents of agricultural land near Grand Bay to begin independent farming. With the support of his sons and the help of other former immigrants, he cultivated crops and supplied meat to the Vale Sugar Estate. By 1856, Mahamod and his family owned 31 arpents of land near the Vale Sugar Estate, purchased for 1,250 piastres, with Captain West as the sole guarantor. Mahamod's success made his family one of the earliest prominent Indo-Mauritian landowning families in the Pamplemousses district. He passed away in 1876 at the age of 95 after a long, productive life as a head servant, small estate owner, and community leader. Captain West honoured him with an obituary in *Le Mauricien*, a rare gesture during the imperial age, especially from a British official to a former indentured labourer. Mahamod's journey inspired further migration, encouraging others to come as contract workers to Mauritius.

Vijaya Teelock, a prominent scholar of indenture, observes that in the early phase, 'Uninterruptedly, the Indian contractual labourers were introduced in Mauritius in small groups at the request of individual local planters' (Ibidem). In the initial years, these early migrants from India and China were often employed in domestic roles such as babysitters, semi-skilled, and skilled labour under two- or four-year agreements. Companies like Thompson and Company played a pivotal role in these experimental recruitment efforts.

Regulation, recruitment, and the rise of indenture

As slavery faded out, Mauritian planters sought an alternative labour source to meet the increasing demand of the booming sugar industry. They supported the agreement-based indenture system over free labour to ensure a guaranteed and renewable supply of workers. This phase featured more structured, government-regulated recruitment and travel sponsorships. Legally, labourers were required to sign contracts in their home regions that specified the duration and nature of work. However, illegal practices such as forced recruitment, deception, and even kidnapping drew criticism from anti-indenture activists and reformers, who demanded its abolition. The Recruitment was the most misused aspect of the system. As noted in the *Report of Mr. JP Woodcock* (November 19, 1836), included in the *East Indian Labourers Bill 1838* (Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library), malpractice was rampant. In response, a more formal system developed with officially designated recruitment agents, sub-agents in rural districts, and port verification officers. These intermediaries were tasked with ensuring that emigrants left voluntarily and were well informed about their destinations and job conditions. The three major recruitment ports in India were Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras.

Although the colonial government oversaw departures, some labourers were clandestinely shipped from French-controlled Puducherry. Emigrants came primarily from present-day Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, and Tamil Nadu, with later migrants from Haryana and other regions. Over time, a pattern emerged: South Indians were sent mainly to Ceylon, Myanmar, and Malaya, while North Indians were deployed to Natal, Fiji, Suriname, and the Guianas. During the early period, emigrants from various regions were dispersed to different colonies, reflecting both the diversity of Indian society and the expansive reach of British colonial labour policies (Mishra 2009).

A prominent indenture site: Bras d'Eau

The estate of Bras d'Eau holds one of the oldest archaeological records of plantations in the world that used enslaved labour. Privately held from 1786 until 1904, it now functions as a national park. This investigation focuses on the household compositions and domestic configurations occupied by enslaved and later indentured workers. Around 550 immigrants were placed to work on the Bras d'Eau estate in the mid-nineteenth century (MNA HA101: 263, 267; House of Commons 1847: 187; de Joux 1865: 147). Among them, women and children laboured alongside men who formed the majority of the enslaved population. Interestingly, although women were not legally permitted to sign indenture contracts, their presence increased significantly over time. Records indicate that women comprised around 11% of the labouring population in the 1840s, rising to 25% by the 1860s. This shift was due to colonial policies that mandated a minimum percentage of female passengers aboard ships transporting labourers. A similar rise was seen in the number of children, particularly in 1847, when 61 boys and girls (11%) were born on the estate (Haines 2019, 16).

Between enslavement and indenture: Continuities in landscape and labour

The indentured workers were placed in, and rebuilt, spaces previously occupied by enslaved people. This created a material and spatial continuity that blurred the transition between the two regimes. The misconceptions of colonial authorities about indentured labour and their relationship to land may have stemmed from the plantation's legacy of slavery (Haines 2019, 2). The material landscape of Mauritius changed only incrementally, resisting any clear temporal divide between the eras of enslavement and indenture. While Bras d'Eau's history originates in the slavery period, it shares architectural continuities with plantation sites across Africa and the Indian Ocean. However, the rising influx of Indian indentured workers gradually altered its character. Comparative studies of households allow archaeologists to trace everyday patterns and demonstrate the diversity of lived experiences within domestic spaces (Franklin 2020). The design of homes at Bras d'Eau reveals how the material and spatial infrastructure from the slavery era served as the foundational framework for indentured labourers' habitation (Haines 2019, 2).

Postcolonial identity and ongoing diaspora bonds

Mauritius's path to independence was shaped significantly by political pressure from India and international allies. However, a unified sense of nationalism has always been fragile. Ancestry, class, religion, and ethnicity continue to influence the island's political and social structures. As a result, diasporic identity has been deeply embedded in Mauritius since its emergence as an autonomous state. In 2015, the French Embassy and the Government of Mauritius commemorated the 300th anniversary of the French presence on the island, emphasizing enduring Francophone ties. France remains a key partner in infrastructure, education, and trade. It has helped fund major projects, including roads, a power station (1992), and the digitization of government services. France continues to be a major market for Mauritian textiles and a supporter of development initiatives (Metz, 1994). India, too, has played a central role. Prime Minister Narendra Modi described Mauritius as *Chhotta Bharat* (Little India) during his 2015 visit. India supports a range of development sectors from reducing Mauritius's dependency on sugar and tourism, to aiding in IT, health, and infrastructure. Educational and cultural initiatives like the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (MGI), Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre (RGSC), and Indira Gandhi Centre for Indian Culture (IGCIC) all receive Indian backing. Indian-funded projects include the Metro Express, ENT hospitals, and social housing. Scholarships are also provided to Mauritian students pursuing higher education in India.

China and the Chinese-Mauritian diaspora

The Chinese community has also played a prominent role. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce was established in 1908 to protect Chinese rights and promote culture. China continues to assist Mauritius in technology, culture, education, and infrastructure. Its support includes building stadiums, bridges, and airport terminals. The opening of a Chinese Cultural Centre in 1988 further strengthened these ties. Chinese scholarships help Mauritian students and professionals pursue higher education abroad. Yet, building a cohesive diasporic link has proven more difficult. Some in the Creole community believe that the economic successes attributed to the Indian diaspora during the colonial era overshadow the traumas of African slavery (Lowe Swift 2007). This has spurred the Mauritian government to actively promote African and Creole heritage.

Recognizing African and Creole legacies

To balance historical narratives, Mauritius has made efforts to uplift African and Creole contributions. The Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture, established in 1986, plays a central role in celebrating African identity. In 2008, *Le Morne Brabant* mountain where enslaved people leapt to their deaths to escape colonial capture was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The *Le Morne Cultural Landscape* now serves as a powerful memorial to resistance and suffering. Mauritius maintains strong ties with the African continent. It is a member of the African Union, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). While debates continue over which diasporic relationships should take precedence, Mauritius has benefited greatly from all of them particularly in education, development aid, trade, and cultural preservation (Ramtohul 2021). These enduring connections have helped maintain the island's linguistic, cultural, and economic vitality.

Conclusion

Indian indentured labour marks a pivotal moment in colonial history one where mobility and coercion were tightly interwoven. The *Girmitiyas*' migration was shaped by economic desperation, structural violence, cultural adaptation, and a remarkable resilience. Though colonial officials framed indenture as a voluntary and regulated system, the lived experiences of these labourers reveal a reality that closely mirrored slavery. From deceptive recruitment to harsh plantation life, the indenture system stripped individuals of autonomy, imposed racial hierarchies, and subjected many especially women to discrimination and abuse. Yet, amidst the brutal conditions, the *Girmitiyas* forged new identities and communities. They maintained, modified, and created cultural traditions that would shape the social fabric of countries like Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Fiji. In this sense, the legacy of indenture extends beyond the plantation economy it lives on in the language, religion, cuisine, and politics of these diasporic societies. Scholars who study indenture today not only expose the structural injustices of the system but also foreground the agency and cultural contributions of these migrants. The history of indenture, therefore, is not simply one of victimhood but also of endurance, adaptation, and cultural innovation. In Mauritius, the indenture system was central to reshaping the island's demography

and cultural identity. Indian migration under indenture led many to settle permanently, giving rise to a multi-ethnic society with strong diasporic consciousness. Postcolonial Mauritius, with its relatively stable democratic framework and institutional recognition of diverse histories, illustrates the long afterlives of indenture. The state's efforts to commemorate the abolition of slavery and the arrival of indentured labourers through national holidays reflect a politics of inclusive memory. Yet, the persistence of ethnic mobilisation in politics underscores the challenges of building a shared national identity in a society born of multiple diasporas.

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