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Hands That Traveled: Labor and Cultural Intersections

Neha Vishwakarma
PhD Research Scholar, Department of History,
K. J. Somaiya College of Arts and Commerce, Mumbai
(Affiliation with the University of Mumbai)

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Abstract

India's historical trading networks have long been celebrated for the exchange of spices, textiles, and cultural traditions. However, this narrative obscures a darker dimension: the trade in human labor. Under British colonial rule, the indentured labor system transformed Indians into commodities, forcibly transporting hundreds of thousands of laborers (Girmitiyas, indentured laborers) across the Empire in a thinly veiled continuation of slavery.

This human trade paradoxically catalyzed cultural exchange and amalgamation, establishing new communities and transplanting Hinduism to distant lands. Unlike traded goods, these were people carrying their heritage, memories, and identities across oceans.

Focusing on Fiji, this paper examines how temporary labor trade became permanent settlement. Indo-Fijians now constitute a substantial portion of Fiji's population, with Hinduism as the nation's second-largest religion. This study explores the cultural transformations that emerged as indentured laborers rebuilt their lives, examining how religious practices, culinary traditions, and cultural identities evolved while maintaining connections to their ancestral homeland.

***Keywords**: Human trade, British indentured labor system, Fiji Islands, cultural exchange, slavery system, Girmitiyas*

Introduction

British trade activities systematically drained India of its resources across multiple dimensions. The colonial system extracted diverse materials including minerals, spices, textiles, cotton, sugar, and jewelry, while also appropriating indigenous knowledge systems and exploiting human labor through bonded labor.

Among the most documented and exploitative practices of the colonial period was the British indentured labor system. Following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire (1833–1834), colonial authorities established this bonded labor framework to address workforce shortages across their territories. This system resulted in the transportation of millions of Indians to British colonies including Mauritius, Fiji, and South Africa, among others.

The genesis of indentured labor lay in the economic vacuum created by slavery's abolition—in British colonies in 1834 and French colonies in 1839. Plantations producing cotton, tobacco, sugar, and other commercial crops faced acute labor deficits, which colonial administrators sought to fill through systematic recruitment of Indian workers.

The recruitment process itself was often manipulative and deceptive. Burdened by extreme poverty, recurrent famines, and crushing debt, many Indians became vulnerable to recruiters who made false promises of lucrative wages and favorable working conditions. In some instances, individuals were compelled to emigrate through outright force.

This mass migration precipitated not only a significant drain of Indian labor but also profound cultural transformations. Separated from their homeland, indentured laborers found it increasingly difficult to maintain traditional religious and cultural practices. Consequently, new mixed cultures emerged in diaspora communities, representing an unintended outcome of this oppressive labor exchange.

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Objectives

This paper examines the brutal trade in human labor under British colonialism, focusing on the indentured labor system in Fiji. While acknowledging the severe suffering imposed on Indian migrants, it also explores how adversity fostered cultural fusion—the emergence of a distinct Indo-Fijian identity. The fact that descendants of indentured laborers now form a significant portion of Fiji's population demonstrates both the diaspora's resilience and the complex legacy of colonial exploitation: communities that transformed oppression into lasting multicultural identities.

Literature Review

The history of Indo-Fijian indentured laborers who traveled between 1879 and 1916 is exceptionally well documented. British colonial records meticulously catalogued each individual who boarded the ships, including details such as father's name, age, caste, marital status, spouse's name, and place of origin. These registers and passes, now accessible through institutions like the National Library of Australia's collection "Indian Emigration Passes to Fiji 1879-1916," allow descendants to trace their genealogies back to their great-grandparents through family archives.

Beyond official colonial documentation, this literature review draws extensively on first-hand accounts from those who endured indenture, either recorded directly or transmitted through dedicated historians. Brij V. Lal's work has been particularly invaluable. His book *Chalo Jahaji* compiles essays about indentured Indians and their Indo-Fijian descendants, written explicitly for younger generations seeking to understand their heritage. Lal's *Levelling Wind: Remembering Fiji* provides additional critical insights into this history.

Digital archives like Girmit.org provide essential resources—visual records, blogs, and oral histories preserving indentured laborers' voices and experiences. Together with scholarly papers on indenture systems, these sources offer a comprehensive foundation for understanding the Indo-Fijian experience.

Background

Between 1836 and 1916, over 1.3 million indentured Indians travelled across the globe, and Fiji became deeply entangled in this process. Five years after Fiji became a British Crown colony, the first Governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, implemented policies designed to establish the foundations of what had been a reluctantly acquired plantation colony. With indigenous Fijians prohibited from commercial employment and labour sources scarce across other Pacific Islands, Gordon looked to India, already supplying indentured workers to sugar colonies throughout the Caribbean, South Africa, and Mauritius.

Indian indentured immigrants first arrived in Fiji in 1879. Between that year and 1916, over 60,000 Indian men, women, and children made their journey. Adults entered five-year contracts, after which they could return to India at their own expense, or receive free passage after ten years of "industrial residence" in the colony.

The system was meticulously structured and documented characteristics of British colonial administration applied to anything considered tradeable across the empire. Each Indian laborer was processed as though a commodity: assigned an identity mark with contracts, given terms & conditions of use, and tracked with bureaucratic precision. Under this British framework, the laborers became known as "*Girmitiyas*"—Indian indentured workers who departed India in the mid to late 19th century for British colonies, where many would ultimately settle permanently. The term "*Girmit*" is a mispronunciation of "Agreement," referring to the contract under which they migrated.

The group of laborers who travel to Fiji, belonged predominantly from the northern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Calcutta and also a few from South India states. These laborers embarked on their journeys to Fiji with the promise of a better life and work opportunities. Lured by these prospects, they willingly signed 'Girmit' papers, binding themselves to a contracted period of labor. The preponderance of Indian laborers in Fiji reflected the numerical dominance of Indian indentured labor world-wide. These papers made them Girmit products of the British.

The journey from India was never easy—and worsened upon arrival. The month-long sea voyage was traumatic and brutal.

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In March 1879, the Leonidas departed Calcutta carrying bonded laborers to Levuka, Fiji. Trapped aboard with no possibility of escape, migrants endured unsanitary and overcrowded conditions that bred illness and death. Yet they persevered, driven by debts, they had no choice but to repay.

Why did so many people find themselves desperate enough to board these ships bound for distant islands? The answers lie in the painful chapters of our history. Throughout the 19th century, devastating famines swept across Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, and parts of South India. The crisis deepened as large-scale opium cultivation commandeered fertile riverbanks, rendering them useless for food production and destabilizing local governance. Poverty spreads like wildfire. Debt became inescapable. For countless families, migration under indenture seemed the only path to survival.

The Girmitiya Experience: Journey and Life in Fiji

Once they reached the island and began living and working in the fields, they realized these contracts were far from simple agreements. According to the original terms, Girmitiyas were supposedly free to return to India after five years at their own expense, with the option to renew for another five years.

The contracts included specific provisions: duration of service, type of plantation work, number of working days and hours, separate work rates and hours for men and women, weekly wage payments typically on Saturdays, the right to return to India at their own cost after the contract period, eligibility for a free return passage for anyone over twelve who resided continuously for ten years and completed five years of work, daily rations provided by the employer at fourpence per day for the first six months, free half-rations for children aged five to twelve, and access to medical care, hospital accommodation, and medicines. But none of these promises held true.

The Sufferings

The Girmitiyas suffered each day. There are stories of people howling their hearts out in pain and others staying silent to avoid passing on the trauma to younger generations.

One descendant from Fiji, whose parents endured these hardships, shared his perspective while reflecting on the experiences of the next generation. He said, "There is a collective amnesia around the history of girmit in our society, probably because it was such a difficult time and the previous generation didn't want to share those stories and relive the trauma. Even in schools we were taught a watered-down version, as our textbooks were mainly propagating the narrative of the colonizers." He added, "Whenever I talk to my grandparents about the history of Girmit, I sense a hesitancy to share on their part. It feels like they don't want to burden me with the sense of truth."

From 1879 onward, the Girmitiyas found themselves bound by contracts designed to trap them on the plantations. Their freedom was stripped away, replaced by relentless hardship and exploitation. Days stretched into grueling hours of labor in the sugarcane fields under unforgiving conditions, all for wages that barely sustained them. Sexual violence, crushing poverty, and systematic abuse became part of their existence as they built Fiji's infrastructure with their own hands. They lived crammed into filthy, segregated sheds known as "coolie lines," spaces that offered neither privacy nor basic human dignity. The practice of their faith was banned and contact with the world beyond the plantation was severed.

A brutal hierarchy ruled over them, one that relied on fear and punishment rather than fairness or incentive. Their wages stayed frozen for five years, untouched by inflation or the better rates paid to free workers. For South Indians especially, the betrayal cut deep—the promises made to them in India bore no resemblance to the harsh reality they now faced in Fiji. They were promised non-agricultural jobs but they were also forced to work in the fields.

During these years, the Girmitiyas tried to raise their voices and protested the harsh conditions and exploitation they endured. In 1886, laborers at Navuso and Koronivia staged separate protests systematically over-tasked. There were significant uprisings involving 300 and 130 laborers respectively, though both were quickly suppressed. Another brief strike erupted at

Koronivia in 1888, also triggered by excessive workloads.

Many other protests followed over the years. Finally, in November 1916, the system of transporting new indentured laborers to Fiji came to an end. The abolition resulted from mounting humanitarian and nationalist pressure within India, led by figures like Mahatma Gandhi and A.D. Patel, who exposed the exploitative and oppressive nature of the system to the British government.

Despite these brutal circumstances, the Girmitiyas showed remarkable resilience in preserving their diverse cultural practices, languages, and traditions. However, because laborers from different castes lived and worked together under the same conditions, the experience began to reshape their social structures. Traditional caste practices—occupational segregation, restrictions on shared meals, concepts of ritual purity, and culinary distinctions—gradually weakened as survival and solidarity took precedence over old hierarchies.

Hence people accommodated and created from what they knew and what was available. This led to an amalgamation of various Indian regional cultures that gave birth to a unique Indo-Fijian culture, which continues to flourish in Fiji today.

Indo-Fijian: Birth of New Culture and Identity

After years of working on Fijian estates, these indentured workers felt deeply disconnected from the social fabric around them. Although they were the majority as "Indians," they slowly recognized just how different they were from each other. They were separated by religion, culture, music, language, dress, and food. This division led to psychological distress, including anxiety, stress, rejection, and strong fears about their ethnic survival. However, their belief in a shared Indian identity, along with their strong ability to adapt, helped them adjust to their new reality.

Living conditions forced social barriers to crumble. Workers were crowded into barracks which had no space and ventilation. A single room housed either three unmarried men or a married couple with no more than two children. Privacy was impossible; married couples often shared their cramped space with a single man.

Eating, working, and living in such close quarters, the rigid caste system that had defined them in India began to dissolve. Survival demanded a new way of living—and from this necessity, a shared Indo-Fijian identity began to emerge.

Since most Indians arrived from North and South India speaking different dialects and languages, they developed a new common language—a *Koine* language (a common tongue that emerges from contact between dialects) known today as 'Fiji Hindi' or '*Fiji Baat*' (Fiji speech/talk). This linguistic fusion reflected the broader transformation occurring in their communities, evident in their family structures and marriage practices by the second generation.

Food became another site of cultural convergence. Indentured laborers from diverse regions—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh—were forced to share cramped quarters and communal kitchens on the plantations. Limited ingredients combined with collective cooking sparked culinary innovation. A distinctive Indo-Fijian cuisine emerged: North Indian roti paired with South Indian curries, regional spices blended in unexpected ways, and traditional recipes adapted to available tropical ingredients. What began as necessity became identity—a new food culture born from the mixing of India's regional traditions in Fiji's soil.

In terms of marriage, Indo-Fijians continued practicing their traditional ceremonies—though adapted to their new context, the essential core remained intact. In rural areas, arranged marriages persisted in recognizably traditional forms: boys and girls marrying in their late teens, wedding ceremonies spanning multiple days. Hindu marriages saw *Pundits* (Hindu priests) performing rituals in the *mandap* (sacred wedding canopy); Muslim ceremonies observed *Nikah* (Islamic marriage contract) in the presence of a *Maulavi* (Islamic religious scholar).

But during the indenture period itself, maintaining such traditions proved extraordinarily difficult. Contractual restrictions and scarce resources constrained freedom. Traditional arranged marriages became nearly impossible due to severe gender imbalance, displacement, and the collapse of extended family networks that had governed

matchmaking in India. Instead, marriages emerged organically from companionship forged on plantation bonds formed through shared suffering and mutual dependence. Where possible, elders, religious figures, or senior workers helped arrange matches, attempting to preserve some semblance of tradition.

Consent gradually became more central, particularly for women, as the rigid village hierarchies of India no longer held sway. In this alien land, marriage offered protection, social legitimacy, and belonging motivations as practical as they were cultural.

Traditional wedding rituals were necessarily shortened and adapted. The *saptapadi*—seven steps around the sacred fire—was retained wherever possible, symbolizing marriage's binding nature. *Sindoor* (vermilion applied in the hair parting of a married Hindu woman), *mangalsutra* (sacred necklace symbolising a Hindu marriage), and sacred vows gained emphasis as portable symbols of commitment requiring no wealth. Celebrations remained modest yet profoundly meaningful. Folk songs, *Bhojpuri* (a dialect of Hindi from the Bhojpur region of north India) wedding verses, rhythmic clapping, and collective singing replaced professional musicians. These songs carried memories of India, allowing Girmitiyas to emotionally reconnect with their roots even as they built new lives in Fiji.

With time, after enduring tremendous struggles and the eventual abolition of the indenture system, Indo-Fijians began rebuilding their communities with determination. They constructed schools, temples, and mosques, deliberately implanting Indian traditions, customs, and culture in their children—ensuring the next generation would not suffer the alienation and hardship they had endured.

Traditional Hindu practices took root in Fijian soil. The Girmit system's legacy continues to shape Fiji's society and culture. Indo-Fijian descendants maintain strong connections to their Indian heritage while contributing significantly to national life. Politically, figures like James Madhavan and Siddiq Moidin Koya shaped democratic institutions, while Mahendra Chaudhry became Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister in 1999. Beyond politics, Indo-Fijians have enriched Fiji's sports, film, music, and arts—their influence woven into modern Fijian identity.

Conclusion

The intricate relationship between religion, trade routes, and culture reveals itself as a defining thread in Indian history. Indians have consistently wielded influence beyond their geographical boundaries, and this paper demonstrates that trade encompasses far more than the exchange of material goods—it includes the movement of people, the transmission of memories, and the sharing of stories that form the bedrock of our collective past.

The forced migration of Indians under the British indenture system stands as a traumatic chapter in this history, yet it paradoxically illustrates trade's profound transformative power. Fiji, once devoid of Indian presence, now hosts a vibrant Indo-Fijian community that has fundamentally reshaped the nation's demographic and cultural landscape. Within this diaspora lie stories of remarkable cultural synthesis—communities that have forged new identities while maintaining connections to their ancestral heritage, creating hybrid traditions that honor both old and new worlds.

However, this legacy demands acknowledgment of its darker dimensions. The indenture system inflicted generational trauma that reverberates through Indo-Fijian families today. It precipitated enduring identity crises, spawned heartbreaking narratives of families fractured across continents, and exposed communities to various forms of racism and discrimination. This displacement gave birth to a diaspora perpetually engaged in the complex work of reconciling their present with their origins, forever navigating between belonging and yearning.

The Indo-Fijian experience thus serves as a powerful testament to trade's dual nature—illuminating both humanity's capacity for adaptation and cultural preservation, while simultaneously exposing the brutal consequences of colonialism and forced migration that continue to shape lives generations later.

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