

Cultural Identity and Economic Change in Mauritius: The Legacy of Indian Indentured Labour

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Abstract

The history of Mauritius is deeply intertwined with the system of Indian indentured labour introduced during the nineteenth century under British colonial rule. Following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834, plantation economies faced severe labour shortages, particularly in sugar-producing colonies. Mauritius became one of the earliest and most significant destinations for Indian indentured workers, who arrived primarily from regions such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh in India (Allen, 1999). Over time, these migrants transformed not only the economic structure of Mauritius but also its cultural, political, and social identity. The descendants of Indian indentured labourers today constitute a major portion of the Mauritian population and have played a decisive role in shaping national identity, democratic institutions, linguistic practices, and religious traditions. The indenture system created a unique diasporic society in which Indian customs merged with African,

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European, and Chinese influences, giving rise to a multicultural Mauritian nation. At the same time, economic transformation—from plantation labour to political participation, entrepreneurship, and global economic integration—demonstrates how formerly marginalized communities became central actors in national development.

This chapter examines the relationship between cultural identity and economic change in Mauritius through the lens of the historical legacy of Indian indentured labour. It explores the origins of indenture, the formation of Indo-Mauritian identity, the socio-economic mobility of indentured descendants, and the broader implications for postcolonial nation-building.

Keywords: *Indentured labour migration, Super plantation, Indo-Mauritians, Cultural Identity*

Introduction

Permanent migration, whether forced or voluntary, has both positive and negative feedback. On the positive side, it fosters cultural diversity, helps fill the skills gap in host countries, and benefits the local economy. Apart from this, the people who move from one location to another must have mental trauma of their disconnection from their motherland and fear of adjustment to dwell in a new land. Every person has a different tale and personal description, and at the same time, cultural identity is carried with every person. Compelled migration occurs when migrants are forced to leave home. It can be hard to feel alienated from your cultural roots and not accepted by the majority culture. This can lead to feelings of isolation and lack of support, which can be a big blow to one's self-esteem. There are many reasons for these feelings, for example: the challenges in moving to a new place, the adaptation to culture shock, unmet expectations, and the struggle to adjust to a new country. Therefore, it is necessary to have knowledge about these problems and to support the people who are suffering from the same (Bhagura, D.2004). Cultural bereavement can be used to describe the loss of a person's social and cultural framework in another setting. In this light, the decade of 1830 is considered the most important and memorable event in the history of India and Great Britain. The unpleasant experience of indentured migration is a process by which people are recruited to work in another nation under a contract for a specified amount of time. Some of the special pains and challenges of indentured migration include: separation from the family, exploitation and abuse, Harsh

living conditions due to social boundaries, and cultural shock, along with a lack of legal rights.

Historical Background of Indian Indentured Labour in Mauritius

Indian indentured labour migration to Mauritius has its roots in the early nineteenth century during the period of British colonial control. With the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834, the plantation owners of Mauritius were confronted with a serious scarcity of manpower. To tackle this problem, the British colonial administration developed the system of indentured servitude, whereby individuals were recruited from India on fixed-term contracts to work largely on sugar plantations. Mauritius was one of the earliest British colonies to experiment with this new type of work. The first set of Indian indentured servants came to Mauritius in 1834 on the ship *Atlas*. The majority of these migrants hailed from the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and other pockets of India where poverty, starvation, unemployment, and societal problems compelled them to look for possibilities overseas. They were dubbed “Arkatis,” or recruiters, who encouraged peasants to sign contracts for income, housing, and a better life. The labourers were contracted to work under the stringent conditions of the plantation for a defined period – generally five years. While they were officially free workers and not slaves, their lives were generally characterized by harsh treatment, low earnings, long working hours, and inadequate living circumstances (Tinkar, 1974). Many of the labourers encountered language challenges, strange locations and alienation from their relatives and culture. Despite these problems, many Indians preferred to stay in Mauritius after their contracts had been completed and not to return to India.

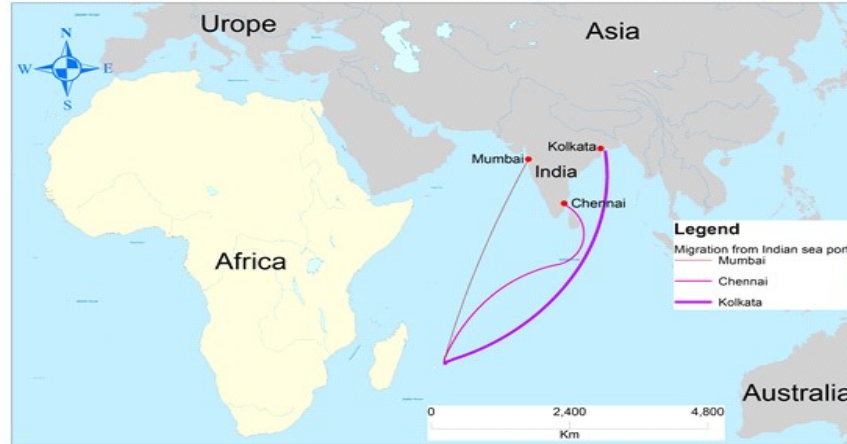
The first group of Indian labourers arrived in Mauritius in 1834 through the port area now recognized as the Aapravasi Ghat, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Between 1834 and the early twentieth century, nearly half a million Indians migrated to Mauritius under indenture agreements (Carter, 1995). Although the contracts promised wages, housing, and eventual return passage, many labourers experienced harsh working conditions, low wages, and exploitative plantation management.

Recruitment and Migration Patterns

Recruitment networks operated mainly in northern and southern India. Economic hardship, famine, caste discrimination, indebtedness, and

colonial disruption encouraged migration. Arkatis (recruiting agents/) often misled workers about conditions abroad, portraying Mauritius as a land of opportunity (Bissoondoyal & Servansing, 1989).

MIGRATION OF INDIAN INDENTURED LABOURERS TO MAURITIUS (1826-1916)



The voyage itself represented a transformative social experience. Labourers from diverse linguistic, caste, and regional backgrounds interacted closely during long sea journeys. Traditional caste boundaries weakened, contributing to the emergence of a shared “girmitiya” identity—a term derived from the word “agreement,” referring to the indenture contract (Lal, 2000).

The migration of indentured labourers to Mauritius mainly took place through three major ports: Kolkata, Chennai, and Mumbai. The port of Kolkata (Calcutta) was the most important centre of migration. Most labourers departing from this port came from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and parts of West Bengal. These migrants were mainly Bhojpuri- and Hindi-speaking agricultural workers who later formed the largest Indian community in Mauritius (Tinker, 1974). The second major port was Chennai (Madras). Migrants travelling through this port mainly originated from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and parts of Kerala. Tamil and Telugu-speaking labourers migrated due to drought, poverty, and lack of employment opportunities. They contributed significantly to the cultural and religious diversity of Mauritius. The port of Mumbai (Bombay) handled a smaller number of migrants from western India, especially from Maharashtra and Gujarat. Apart from labourers, Gujarati traders and artisans

also migrated through this route and later became active in trade and commerce in Mauritius (Allen, 1999). Table 1 shows the numbers of indentured labour migration (males & females separately), it also indicated how women migrations increased after 1841 which changed the cultural landscapes of Mauritius historically.

Table 1: Emigration Pattern and Proportion of Male and Female Immigrants

S. No.	Years	Arrivals		Departures	
		Males	Females	Males	Females
1.	1834-1840	24442	961	10042	61
2.	1841-1850	79863	13827	25131	2359
3.	1851-1860	135860	48195	35542	6659
4.	1861-1870	51898	19404	22891	6775
5.	1871-1880	25818	12011	19502	5585
6.	1881-1890	13354	5824	13568	3936
7.	1891-1900	5954	2240	7743	2340
8.	1901-1910	8847	3298	3342	1163
9.	1911-1920	-	-	1680	618
	Total (1834-1920)	346036	105760	130441	29396

Source: k, Hazareesingh (1965-66:2

Plantation Economy and Economic Transformation: Sugar Economy and Colonial Capitalism

The Mauritian economy during the nineteenth century was dominated by sugar production. Indian labour became the foundation of colonial agricultural capitalism. Indentured workers cultivated and harvested sugarcane under demanding conditions that resembled slavery in many respects (Tinker, 1974).

Despite exploitation, Indian labour contributed significantly to Mauritius's economic prosperity. Sugar exports generated colonial wealth and integrated Mauritius into global trade networks. By the late nineteenth century, the colony had become one of the world's leading sugar exporters (Allen, 1999).

Transition from Labourers to Landowners

A significant economic shift occurred as some indentured labourers completed their contracts and chose to remain in Mauritius rather than return to India. Over time, many acquired small plots of land and engaged in subsistence farming and small-scale commerce (Carter, 1995).

Land ownership represented both economic security and social mobility. Indo-Mauritians gradually moved beyond plantation labour into trade, education, and professional occupations. This transition laid the foundation for the emergence of a rural middle class and altered the island's socio-economic structure.

Table 2: Historical Landmarks for Indo- Mauritian

S. No.	Major events	Historical contribution
1.	Abolition of the Slavery Act	A search for a substitute for slaves had been identified.
2.	The great experiment	An Indian had been chosen as a labourer for the sugar plants for the trial, which later succeeded.
3.	Indentured migration	The massive migration of laborers from India and other countries began on a contractual basis.
4.	Women into indentured migration	Government initiatives to stabilize the immigrant to new country contributed to the reorganization of the social system in Mauritius.
5.	Shift from camps to the village	Promotion and development of cultural and religious practices
6.	Land ownership by immigrants	Emergence of Immigrants as a social and cultural unit.
7.	Establishment of <i>Kali Mai</i> shrines	Religious independence
8.	Role of <i>Baithka/Chaupal</i>	Development of cultural and social harmony among immigrants.
9.	End of indenture	
10.	Independence of Mauritius	Citizenship and constitutional rights in the country.
11.	Educational rights to women	Establishment of women's art and craft as a national heritage.

Singh, K.P. (2023)

By analysing Table 2, the economic development of Indo-Mauritians can be understood through three major historical phases: the plantation labour phase, the agrarian landownership phase, and the modern diversification phase. These phases reflect the gradual socio-economic transformation of Indian indentured labourers and their descendants from plantation workers to influential participants in the economic and political life of Mauritius.

1. Plantation Labour Phase (1834–Late Nineteenth Century)

The first phase began after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834, when the colonial government introduced the indenture system to meet labour shortages on sugar plantations. Thousands of Indians migrated to Mauritius under contractual agreements to work primarily on sugar estates (Allen, 1999). Most labourers originated from rural regions of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and worked under difficult economic and social conditions.

During this phase, Indo-Mauritians occupied the lowest level of the colonial economy. They received low wages, experienced strict labour regulations, and had limited access to education and political rights (Carter, 1995). Their economic activities remained largely dependent on plantation agriculture controlled by Franco-Mauritian elites. Despite these hardships, indentured labourers developed systems of savings and mutual assistance that later contributed to economic mobility.

According to Allen (1999), the plantation economy shaped the early economic identity of Indo-Mauritians by integrating them into the colonial sugar industry while simultaneously limiting opportunities for advancement.

2. Agrarian Landownership Phase (Late Nineteenth Century–Mid-Twentieth Century)

The second phase emerged when former indentured labourers began purchasing and leasing agricultural land after completing their labour contracts. Economic changes in the sugar industry, including the subdivision of estates and fluctuations in sugar prices, enabled many Indians to acquire small plots of land (Teelock, 1998).

Land ownership significantly improved the socio-economic condition of Indo-Mauritians. Former labourers became independent cultivators engaged in sugarcane farming, food crop production, and petty trade. This transition reduced dependence on plantation labour and contributed to the rise of a rural peasant economy (Simmons, 1982). Ownership of land also strengthened family stability, encouraged permanent settlement, and improved access to education for future generations.

Carter (1995) argues that the acquisition of land represented a major turning point because it allowed Indo-Mauritians to establish economic independence and social respectability within colonial society. During this period, education and religious institutions also contributed to the growth of political consciousness among Indo-Mauritians.

3. Modern Diversification Phase (Post-Independence, 1968–Present)

The third phase began after the independence of Mauritius in 1968 under the leadership of Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. During this period, Mauritius diversified its economy beyond sugar production into manufacturing, tourism, financial services, and information technology.

Indo-Mauritians increasingly entered professional occupations, government administration, business, and higher education. Economic diversification and state investment in education created opportunities for upward mobility and the growth of a substantial middle class (Mathur, 1991). Many Indo-Mauritians became successful entrepreneurs, civil servants, teachers, lawyers, and medical professionals.

According to Simmons (1982), the post-independence period marked the consolidation of Indo-Mauritian political and economic influence in national development. Education became one of the most important factors contributing to economic advancement during this phase.

The three phases of development demonstrate the gradual transformation of Indo-Mauritians from indentured plantation workers to economically and politically empowered citizens. Labour, land ownership, education, and political participation collectively shaped the economic history of the Indo-Mauritian community.

Post-Independence Economic Diversification

After gaining independence in 1968, Mauritius diversified its economy beyond sugar production into textiles, tourism, financial services, and information technology. Indo-Mauritian political leadership played a central role in implementing developmental policies that promoted economic growth and social welfare (Eriksen, 1998).

Economic modernization also transformed labour relations and social aspirations. Education became a key instrument of mobility among Indo-Mauritian communities, enabling participation in state administration, business, and global industries. The success of Mauritius as a stable, middle-income economy is often linked to its ability to balance ethnic diversity with economic inclusion.

Language and Cultural Preservation

Indian indentured labourers brought diverse languages, including Bhojpuri, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, and Marathi. Although colonial structures privileged English and French, Indo-Mauritian communities

preserved linguistic traditions through religious institutions, family structures, and cultural associations (Eriksen, 1998).

Bhojpuri became particularly influential among rural Indo-Mauritians, serving as a lingua franca among labourers from northern India. However, globalization and urbanization have contributed to language decline among younger generations.

Cultural preservation also occurred through music, dance, folklore, and cuisine. Festivals such as Diwali, Holi, Cavadee, and Eid became central expressions of identity and later evolved into national celebrations recognized by the Mauritian state.

Religion and Social Cohesion

Religion played a critical role in maintaining solidarity among indentured communities. Hinduism became the dominant religion among Indo-Mauritians, while Islam remained significant among Muslim migrants from India. Temples, mosques, and religious organizations served not only spiritual purposes but also educational and social functions (Lal, 2000). Religious rituals provided emotional support in the face of displacement and exploitation. Over generations, Mauritian religious practices incorporated local adaptations, reflecting syncretic interactions with Creole and other cultural traditions.

The Evolution of Indo-Mauritian Identity

The descendants of indentured labourers developed a hybrid identity that combined Indian heritage with Mauritian nationalism. While maintaining ancestral traditions, Indo-Mauritians increasingly identified themselves as citizens of a multicultural republic rather than members of isolated ethnic communities.

This identity formation was influenced by education, political participation, and interethnic interaction. The concept of “unity in diversity” became central to Mauritian national discourse, emphasizing coexistence among Hindus, Muslims, Creoles, Chinese, and Franco-Mauritians (Eriksen, 1998).

Women’s role in the establishment of Cultural identity

Although women migrated to Mauritius through the colonial pattern of recruitment in Indentured labour migration. Since 1842, the government had controlled migration, and every element of the Indian labourer was regulated under the indenture system. The presence of Indian indentured

women in the plantation fields depended crucially on government intervention. It was this government action that ensured a sex ratio of about 40 women per 100 men from India between 1843 and 1919. Many women who relocated to the indenture system did so because their living conditions in India were not suitable (Carter, 2012). Women's role in the retention of Indian culture is crucial; they not only contributed to labour work but also stabilised the population through Marriage and family. Remarkably, they upheld the roots of belonging through their traditional arts, crafts, cuisines, and customs passed down from generation to generation in Mauritius. *Baithka* and community centres, and celebrations of various Indian festivals.

Role of the cultural landscape established by early immigrants

Tangible Cultural landscapes	Significant for
<i>Baithka</i>	Religious, social-cultural, or other activities
<i>Kalimai</i> Temples	Cohesion, integrity, and continuation of ritual belief
Other religious Temples	Belongingness to the faith and identity

Source: Singh, K.P. (2023)

Aapravasi Ghat and Historical Memory

The preservation of Aapravasi Ghat symbolizes the recognition of indentured labour history within global heritage discourse. The site commemorates the arrival of Indian migrants and acknowledges their contribution to Mauritian society.

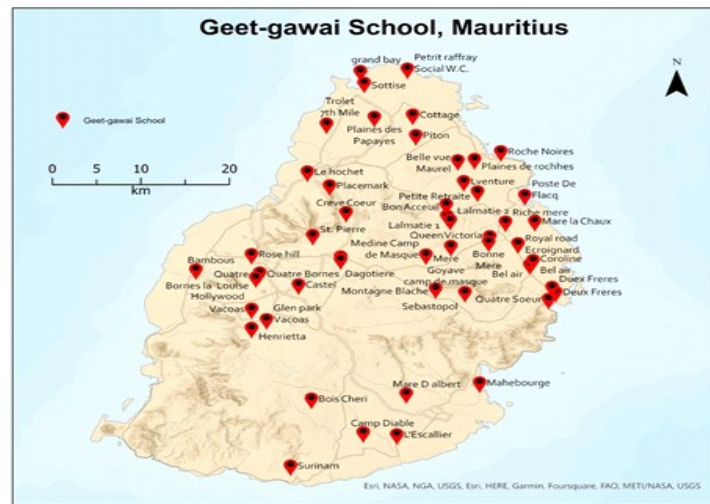
Public memory of indenture has become an important aspect of national identity. Museums, literature, films, and commemorative events reinforce awareness of ancestral struggles and achievements.

Diaspora and Transnational Connections

Mauritius maintains strong cultural and diplomatic ties with India. Indian films, television, music, and religious networks continue to influence Mauritian society. At the same time, Indo-Mauritians negotiate multiple identities shaped by local citizenship and global diasporic connections. Transnationalism has also expanded through migration to countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and Australia. These movements further complicate notions of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity.

Contemporary Challenges: Cultural Preservation in a Globalized World

Globalization poses challenges to traditional languages and customs. Younger generations increasingly adopt cosmopolitan lifestyles influenced by digital media and global consumer culture. Mauritius holds a multilingual and multicultural society due to its long colonial history. The decline of Bhojpuri and reduced participation in traditional practices raise concerns about cultural erosion. Government and cultural organizations like the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Apravasi GHAT Trust Fund, Indra Gandhi Centre for Indian Culture, and various informal and formal institutions like Geet Gawai schools established by Sarita Budhho have introduced initiatives to preserve ancestral heritage through language education and cultural festivals. Geet Gawai, a legacy of Bhojpuri songs that started in India, blossomed in Mauritius, and had remarkable success in establishing it on a global scale. In 2016, UNESCO recognized it and inscribed it to the list of intangible cultural heritage (Boodho, S., 2023). 50 Geet Gwai Schools, which are symbols of cultural identity, were founded by Mrs. Sarita Boodho, the former chairwoman of the Bhojpuri Speaking Union of Mauritius. Map 2 shows the Geet Gawai School in Mauritius.



Conclusion

The legacy of Indian indentured labour in Mauritius represents one of the most significant examples of diasporic transformation in the

modern world. What began as a colonial labour system evolved into a process of cultural adaptation, economic mobility, and political empowerment. Indian indentured labourers and their descendants reshaped Mauritius economically through agricultural production and later through participation in diversified industries and governance.

At the cultural level, Indo-Mauritians preserved languages, religions, traditions, and collective memories while simultaneously contributing to a broader national identity grounded in multiculturalism. The Mauritian experience demonstrates how migration, labour, and cultural resilience can produce new forms of social belonging and national development.

The history of indenture remains central to understanding contemporary Mauritius. It highlights both the exploitative nature of colonial capitalism and the agency of migrant communities in transforming adversity into opportunity. As Mauritius continues to navigate globalization and social change, the legacy of Indian indentured labour remains a foundational element of its cultural identity and economic evolution

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