

From indenture to identity: Religion, culture, and diaspora in Mauritius

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Abstract: Mauritius, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean, stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of diasporic religiosity and cultural diversity. The rich tapestry of religious beliefs, practices, and cultural traditions woven into the social fabric of Mauritius reflects the complex history of migration, colonization and intercultural exchange that has shaped the island's identity. This paper examines the impact of indentured diasporic religious practices and cultural identity in Mauritius. It explores how religious traditions introduced by indentured labourers from India alongside contributions from African, Chinese and European migrants were transmitted, adapted, and preserved in a multicultural island society. Drawing on diaspora theories of lived religion, and postcolonial perspective, it analyzes the transmission and adaptation of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and indigenous beliefs among migrants, highlighting the role of religious institutions in fostering community cohesion. The study traces the establishment of indentured service in post-1838 Mauritius, driven by global demand for sugar, and explores how migrants from diverse Indian regions contributed to the island's Creole identity. It discusses religious pluralism, facilitated by colonial policies, and the enduring influence of Indian culture on language, attire, cuisine and politics. The paper also addresses the significance of sites like Aapravasi Ghat, reflecting Mauritius' history, and debates surrounding its renaming. Ultimately, it portrays Mauritius as a multicultural society shaped by immigration and religious diversity, with diasporic religiosity playing a pivotal role in shaping national identity.

Keywords: diasporic religiosity, cultural identity, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Aapravasi Ghat, Mauritius

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Introduction

Mauritius, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean, stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of diasporic religiosity and cultural diversity. The rich tapestry of religious beliefs, practices, and cultural traditions woven into the social fabric of Mauritius reflects the complex history of migration, colonization, and intercultural exchange that has shaped the island's identity. At the heart of this intricate mosaic lies the experience of indentured laborers and their descendants, whose journey from distant shores brought with them a kaleidoscope of religious and cultural expressions.

This paper aims to delve into the dynamics of diasporic religiosity and its profound impact on cultural identity in Mauritius (Mohammed 2021). Through a historical lens, we will explore the transmission, adaptation, and preservation of diverse religious traditions among indentured migrants, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and indigenous belief systems. By examining the role of religious institutions such as temples, mosques, churches, and festivals, we seek to unravel the intricate interplay between religious practices and social cohesion within the Mauritian context.

The establishment of indentured service in Mauritius in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in 1838 marked a pivotal moment in the island's history. Driven by the burgeoning demand for labor in the sugar plantations and propelled by global economic forces, thousands of laborers from India, Africa, China, and other regions embarked on a journey to Mauritius.

Despite enduring hardships and exploitation, many migrants chose to settle permanently in Mauritius, contributing to the island's burgeoning multicultural society. Furthermore, we will explore how religious pluralism flourished in Mauritius, facilitated by the colonial government's tolerance of diverse religious practices and the construction of religious institutions. The coexistence of Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, Christian churches, and indigenous shrines served as testament to the spirit of religious tolerance and mutual respect among Mauritians.

Moreover, this paper will analyze the enduring influence of Indian culture on Mauritius, as evidenced by the widespread adoption of Indian languages, attire, cuisine, and religious practices. The dominance of individuals of Indian descent in Mauritius' political

landscape underscores the enduring legacy of Indian migration and its impact on the nation's identity.

Lastly, we will examine the significance of sites such as the Aapravasi Ghat, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in commemorating Mauritius' rich history of indentured labor and intercultural exchange. By critically analyzing the renaming of the site from *Coolie Ghat* to *Aapravasi Ghat*, we will unpack the complexities of memory, identity, and representation in postcolonial Mauritius (Mohammed 2021).

This paper seeks to unravel the multifaceted layers of diasporic religiosity and cultural identity in Mauritius, shedding light on the enduring legacy of migration, resilience, and cultural exchange that continues to shape the nation's collective consciousness.

Historical context

The institution of indentured servitude was established upon the historical precedent and practices of slavery. Following the emancipation of slaves in Mauritius in 1838, landowners turned to India as a primary source of inexpensive labor.

In the 1820s and 1830s, laborers on five-year contracts began arriving in Mauritius, with a small percentage coming from China, Southeast Asia, and Africa, though the majority was of Indian descent (Allen 1999). Between 1834 and 1909, Mauritius received nearly 452,000 indentured servants, making it the largest recipient among British plantation colonies (Northrup 1995). The global demand for sugar, coupled with changes in the economic landscape, particularly the British trade policy regarding sugar production, spurred the transformation of Mauritius into a sugar colony. The abolition of a favorable tax on Caribbean sugar by the British government in 1825 incentivized planters in non-Atlantic territories to shift their focus to sugar cane cultivation. Additionally, the resilience of sugar cane in the face of natural disasters, such as the storms that devastated other crops in Mauritius in 1824, further contributed to this shift (Teelock 1998). The proliferation of sugar mills and the expansion of sugar plantations in Mauritius during the 19th century underscored its significance as a hub for sugar production. By the 1860s, over 20% of the island was devoted to sugarcane cultivation, with Mauritius contributing a substantial portion of the global sugar output (Allen 1999).

Indentured labor played a crucial role in sustaining the sugar industry's growth, necessitating the establishment of new trade networks and infrastructure. While early interpretations likened

indenture to a form of slavery (Tinker 1974), subsequent scholarship has offered more nuanced perspectives (Allen 2012; Hurgobin and Basu 2015).

Indentured laborers, unlike slaves, were considered paid workers rather than property. Despite enduring some characteristics reminiscent of slavery, they were legally contracted and had the expectation of eventual repatriation. However, a significant proportion of migrants chose to settle permanently in Mauritius, contributing to the colony's demographic and cultural transformation. Indentured laborers hailed from diverse regions of India, representing a variety of cultural, religious, and caste backgrounds. While they brought with them distinct linguistic and cultural practices, they also assimilated into Mauritian society, shaping its unique Creole identity (Hurgobin 2016). The recruitment of indentured laborers often involved returnees facilitating the migration of individuals from their home regions, resulting in the formation of cohesive groups on plantations. Despite the hardships they faced, including exploitative working conditions, many indentured laborers forged new lives in Mauritius, leaving a lasting impact on the colony's socio-economic landscape (Carter 1995; Bates 2017).

Theoretical framework and methodology

The rich tapestry of religious beliefs, practices, and cultural traditions woven into the social fabric of Mauritius reflects the complex history of migration, colonization, and intercultural exchange that has shaped the island's identity. At the heart of this intricate mosaic lies the experience of indentured labourers and their descendants, whose journey from distant shores brought with them a kaleidoscope of religious and cultural expressions.

The analysis in this paper is framed within diaspora theory (Safran 1991; Clifford 1994; Vertovec 2000) and concepts of lived religion (Vasquez 2011). Additionally, we draw on postcolonial perspectives (Hall 1990; Bhabha 1994) to examine how cultural identity is both preserved and rearticulated in the Mauritian context under colonial and postcolonial conditions.

Methodologically, this study adopts a historical-interpretive approach. It relies on archival materials, government reports, and secondary scholarship on Indian indentured (Allen 1999; Carter 1995; Lal 2000; Anderson 2009), alongside ethnographic accounts (Eriksen 1998; Peerthum 2017). Through textual and discourse analysis, the

paper interrogates colonial records, oral histories, and commemorative practices, including the contested memory of sites such as the *Aapravasi Ghat*.

This multi-sourced method allows for nuanced understanding of how religious and cultural practices migrated, transformed, and embedded themselves into the Mauritian landscape. By examining the role of religious institutions such as temples, mosques, churches, and festival, we seek to unravel the intricate interplay between religious practices and social cohesion within Mauritian context. Furthermore, we situate diasporic religiosity not simply as cultural survival but as an arena of identity politics, memory-making, and negotiation of belonging.

Religious practices and beliefs

The historical trajectory of Mauritius has been shaped by successive waves of colonization, beginning with the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, French, and ultimately the British. Notably, the island lacked a native population, with each colonial power leaving its imprint on the demographic and socio-cultural landscape.

French colonial rule, which commenced in 1715, marked the first sustained settlement on the island and witnessed the flourishing of sugar cane farming. The French administration imported slaves from various African regions, particularly Madagascar and Mozambique, to labor on sugar plantations, laying the groundwork for the dominance of sugar production in Mauritius. The descendants of French colonists, known as Franco-Mauritians, continue to wield significant influence, particularly in land ownership (Eriksen 1998).

The socio-cultural fabric of Mauritius reflects its diverse immigrant population, encompassing Chinese, African, and Indian communities. The latter, descendants of Indian indentured laborers, constitute a substantial portion of the population, with Hinduism and Islam emerging as the predominant religions among Indo-Mauritians.

The Chinese community, engaged primarily in trade and retail, contributes to the island's ethnic mosaic, alongside the Creoles, who are the mixed-race descendants of former slaves (Eriksen 1998).

Religious practices play a central role in Mauritian society, with Hindu temples and Muslim mosques serving as focal points for communal worship and celebration. Despite the diversity of religious affiliations, Mauritians coexist harmoniously, with communal cohesiveness evident in shared religious observances and customs. The

colonial era witnessed the construction of religious sites by sugar plantation owners, fostering a sense of unity among residents irrespective of their faiths (Teelock 2012). The concept of the *baithka*, a communal gathering place for Indian laborers, epitomizes the fusion of cultural and religious traditions among indentured immigrants. Serving as a nexus for social interaction and religious rituals, the *baithka* facilitated the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage, with members organizing festivities such as *Divali* and *Holi*, alongside solemn occasions like funerals and weddings (Ramchurn 2018).

Despite the passage of time and societal evolution, Mauritius remains deeply rooted in its multicultural heritage, with religious practices and communal traditions enduring as integral components of national identity. The enduring legacy of indentured laborers and their communal institutions underscores the resilience of Mauritius's diverse populace in forging a collective sense of belonging and shared cultural heritage.

Transmission of religious identity to descendants

During the migration period, the influx of Indians to Mauritius brought with it a rich tapestry of caste affiliations, customs, languages, and religious practices, which continue to influence the cultural landscape of the island.

The contemporary Indo-Mauritian population remains deeply rooted in its ancestral Indian heritage, adhering to traditional customs and religious rituals (Parekh, Singh & Vertovec 2003). The majority of Indian migrants hailed from regions such as Bombay, Bihar, Madras, and the northwest Indian provinces, contributing to the diverse cultural mosaic of Mauritius (Hazareesingh 1966).

Despite the plurality of socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural identities among Indian immigrants, communal cohesion prevailed throughout the indentured period, fostering a sense of shared experience and solidarity among laborers working in the sugarcane fields. This shared heritage laid the foundation for the predominance of Indian culture in contemporary Mauritius (Hazareesingh 1966).

Marriage customs among Indo-Mauritians often reflect traditional Indian practices, with arranged marriages common among individuals of similar socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds. Rituals such as the application of *tika* by Hindu women and the vermilion division

of hair by married women in urban areas underscore the enduring influence of Indian cultural norms in Mauritius (Eriksen 1992).

The caste system, intrinsic to Indian society, was transplanted to Mauritius by Indian migrants, though its manifestation differed from its Indian counterpart. British clerks overseeing the recruitment process were often unfamiliar with caste distinctions, leading to the ambiguous classification of individuals based on regional identities rather than caste affiliations. Despite attempts to preserve caste distinctions for political gain, caste identities in Mauritius have evolved and become less rigid over time (Mishra 2006).

Religious practices, including Hindu *puranic* ceremonies and the worship of various deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Krishna, remain integral to Indo-Mauritian identity. The construction of religious sites and the observance of religious holidays reflect the enduring influence of Indian cultural and religious traditions in Mauritius (Hazareesingh 1966).

While ethnic identification has superseded caste identity in contemporary Mauritius, caste-based organizations continue to advocate for the preservation of cultural heritage and political representation. These organizations serve as significant interest groups, leveraging caste affiliations to negotiate for resources and political patronage (Niksniketa 2013).

The relationship between India and Mauritius is characterized by a shared cultural affinity and historical connection, with both nations embracing a diverse yet interconnected heritage. The celebration of religious festivals and the preservation of linguistic and cultural traditions underscore the enduring bond between the two nations (Prasad 2000). Despite their geographical separation, Mauritius and India share commonalities in their multicultural ethos and collective consciousness, exemplifying the concept of 'Little India' (Hazareesingh 1966).

Impact on Mauritian culture and society

Mauritius stands as a harmonious nation where diverse cultures and religions peacefully coexist. Indian, African, European, and Chinese influences converge within various national communities, creating a rich tapestry of shared values and traditions.

The island's cultural diversity is exemplified by the celebration of numerous holidays and the active participation of its populace in communal events a defining characteristic of Indo-Mauritian culture

(Hazareesingh 1966). Referred to as 'Little India', Mauritius boasts a plethora of temples, mosques, churches, and *gurudwaras* reminiscent of those found in India. The construction of religious sites, such as the Siva temple in the village of Gokula and the Jamma Mosque, underscores the enduring influence of Indian cultural and religious practices (Ibid.).

The term 'Chhota Bharat' (Little India) gained prominence in 1920 among the upper classes of Hindi-speaking Mauritians, reflecting the island's strong cultural ties to India. Indian nationalist leaders, including Ravindra Nath Tagore, lent their support to the commemoration of Indian immigration anniversaries; further solidifying Indo-Mauritian cultural identity (Prasad 2000).

Despite British colonial rule in Mauritius until 1968, the island's indigenous practices and customs persisted, contributing to what is often referred to as the "Indian atmosphere" that permeates Mauritian society. The Indian diaspora, comprising a significant portion of the population, maintains its cultural identity through daily language usage, traditional attire, and the culinary arts (Hazareesingh 1966).

Indo-Mauritians remain closely connected to their Indian counterparts, sharing customs, philosophies, and cultural practices. Religious ceremonies conducted in Indian languages, accompanied by interpretations in Creole, highlight the fusion of Indian and Mauritian cultural elements (Bissoonauth 1998; Prasad 2000).

A myriad of Indian festivals, including *Holi*, *Diwali*, *Eid*, and *Maha Shivaratri* are enthusiastically observed in Mauritius, serving as occasions for communal celebration and cultural expression (Bissoonauth 1998; Hazareesingh 1966; Prasad 2000).

The culinary landscape of Mauritius reflects the diversity of its Indian population, with traditional dishes such as rice, pickles, *laddu*, and *chutney* contributing to the preservation of culinary heritage (Hazareesingh 1966).

The historical visit of Mahatma Gandhi in 1901 marked a turning point in Indo-Mauritian history, advocating for education and political participation among the Indian diaspora. Subsequent milestones, including Mauritius' independence in 1968 and the establishment of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in 1970, further solidified the island's cultural ties to India (Prasad 2000).

The enduring bond between Mauritius and India is reflected in contemporary diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges. The affectionate term 'Chhota Bharat' continues to resonate among

Mauritians of Indian descent, symbolizing the island's status as a vibrant hub of Indian culture and heritage (Tiwari 2014; Deccan Herald 2011). Mauritius stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Indian culture and heritage, fostering a sense of pride and belonging among its diverse populace. The island's vibrant multicultural fabric serves as a living testament to the shared values and traditions that bind its people together.

Challenges and future directions

The *Aapravasi Ghat*, established in 1849, underwent a series of transformations and served diverse functions throughout its history. Initially known as the Immigration Depot, it functioned as temporary lodging for indentured laborers upon their arrival in Mauritius.

Under British colonial rule, despite the transfer of authority to British governance in 1810, French plantation owners retained economic control, employing indentured laborers predominantly on sugar estates. The depot also served as a venue for registering complaints from laborers and addressing immigration-related matters. Even after the abolition of indenture, the facility continued to handle immigration-related affairs until its gradual abandonment in the mid to late 20th century. In addition to its functional role during the indenture period, the site served as a hub facilitating intercultural interaction among individuals from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Initially referred to as the *Coolie Ghat* in the 1970s, it was later renamed *Aapravasi Ghat* upon its designation as a national monument in 1987. However, this renaming process from 'Coolie Ghat' to 'Aapravasi Ghat', meaning 'immigrants' landing place' in Hindi, presents several problematic implications. Firstly, it marks a departure from the derogatory term 'coolie,' associated with the perceived lowly status of indentured laborers. Secondly, the label 'immigrants' overlooks the fact that many indentured laborers intended to return to their countries of origin.

Additionally, the term *Hindi* in *Aapravasi* reflects a privileging of Hindi-speaking cultural identity, neglecting the linguistic diversity of the indentured diaspora, which encompassed speakers of Bhojpuri, Telugu, Tamil, Urdu, and Mandarin. This renaming may be interpreted as a political and nationalist statement against Indo-Mauritian hegemony, obscuring the history of indentured labor involving workers from Madagascar, Africa, and China.

Following its inscription as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2006, critical assessments of the *Aapravasi Ghat* have become increasingly complex. UNESCO, founded in 1945 to promote global collaboration in culture, education, and research, has faced scrutiny for potential issues related to its organizational operations and decision-making processes.

While beyond the scope of this research, such inquiries underscore potential challenges arising from the site's inclusion in the World Heritage program, Mauritius, characterized by its diverse demographic makeup resulting from successive waves of immigration, grapples with defining a cohesive national identity.

The island's multicultural ethos, encapsulated by the philosophy of 'unity in diversity,' seeks to foster peaceful coexistence among its various ethnic communities. However, scholars such as Thomas Hylland Eriksen question the feasibility of reconciling national unity with the preservation of distinct ethnic identities, highlighting potential tensions between these objectives.

The *Aapravasi Ghat* serves as a tangible symbol of Mauritius' complex history of immigration and labor exploitation. Its renaming and recognition as a World Heritage Site reflect broader debates surrounding cultural heritage, identity politics, and the challenges of fostering national unity in multicultural societies (Forest 2013).

Conclusion

Diasporic religiosity encompasses the religious beliefs, practices, and expressions of a diaspora community residing outside its original homeland. In the case of indentured laborers in Mauritius, this phenomenon manifested through the transmission and adaptation of diverse religious backgrounds, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and indigenous belief systems. These laborers imbued their practices with local contexts while retaining their original faith traditions. Such diasporic religiosity played a pivotal role in shaping cultural identity and fostering social cohesion, with religious institutions like temples, mosques, churches, and festivals serving as pivotal points for community gatherings and solidarity.

The establishment of indentured service in Mauritius post-1838, subsequent to the emancipation of slaves, was driven by a confluence of factors including the global demand for sugar and capital market dynamics, ultimately transforming Mauritius into a sugar colony.

Indentured laborers, representing the diversity of Indian culture, religion, and caste, hailed from various regions such as northeastern states, Madras, and the environs of Mumbai. Despite their distinctive cultural traits, many endured forced displacement from their homelands and were subjected to exploitative conditions on plantations. Nonetheless, a substantial portion of the indentured migrants, approximately 294,000 out of 452,000, opted for permanent settlement in Mauritius, fundamentally altering the demographic landscape and contributing to the evolution of the island's unique Creole identity.

Mauritius, historically a French colony, harbors a heterogeneous population comprising immigrants from China, Africa, India, and descendants of French colonists. Economic power is concentrated among Franco-Mauritians, the progeny of French settlers, and the mixed-race populace referred to as *gens de couleur*.

The predominant religious groups among Indo-Mauritians, descendants of Indian indentured laborers, are Hindus and Muslims, with further divisions along social, linguistic, and caste lines. The Mauritian populace is demarcated into four primary ethnic groups and four major religious factions, each with distinct cultural and religious practices. Despite the presence of caste, regional, linguistic, and cultural differences, indentured laborers fostered communal bonds and established cohesive communities in Mauritius, particularly from the 1910s onward. Religious pluralism flourished in Mauritius, with the colonial government facilitating the construction of temples and mosques, and diverse religious traditions coexisting harmoniously. The cultural legacy brought by Indian immigrants, encompassing their castes, customs, languages, and religions, persisted in the modern Indo-Mauritian population. The majority of migrants hailed from Bombay, Bihar, Madras, and northwestern Indian provinces, practicing puranic ceremonies and venerating various deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Krishna.

Despite challenges in maintaining caste identity, Indo-Mauritians continue to identify with their caste, albeit with a shift towards ethnic identification in Mauritius. The enduring influence of Indian culture in Mauritius is evidenced by the pervasive "Indian atmosphere" and the widespread adoption of Indian languages, attire, and cuisine.

Indo-Mauritians maintain strong cultural ties with their Indian counterparts, celebrating Hindu religious ceremonies and festivals with fervor.

Furthermore, the political landscape of Mauritius has been shaped significantly by individuals of Indian descent, who have dominated the nation's politics since its inception. The Mauritian government's initiative to grant Indian tourists visa-free entry for 60 days in 2014 further underscores the strengthening cultural ties between India and Mauritius.

The *Aapravasi Ghat*, established in 1849 and later inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006, serves as a tangible testament to Mauritius' rich history of indentured labor. This site, initially known as the Immigration Depot, facilitated intercultural contact among diverse ethnic and socioeconomic groups, symbolizing the enduring legacy of diasporic communities in Mauritius. The renaming of the site from *Coolie Ghat* to *Aapravasi Ghat* reflects a political and nationalist assertion against Indo-Mauritian hegemony, highlighting the contested narratives surrounding Mauritius' colonial history. It embodies a multicultural society shaped by successive waves of immigration and diverse religious practices. The dynamics of diasporic religiosity, alongside socio-political developments, have played a pivotal role in shaping Mauritius' cultural landscape and national identity.

Despite challenges and tensions, Mauritius stands as a 'model' postcolonial state, navigating the complex interplay between nationhood and cultural diversity with relative success.

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