
Hindu Diaspora in Mauritius: Continuity and Change in its Intangible Heritage

Abstract

India in general and Hindus in particular take pride on being one of the oldest civilizations in the world, with its history, culture and heritage dating back to thousands of years. Its cultural heritage is the creations of its predecessors that have been passed on by successive generations to be cherished and nourished by the present and future generations. Indians from time immemorial have been migrating to various regions of the world as traders, adventurers, pilgrims, fortune seekers, laborers etc. and many times, settled in the migrated lands and identified as Indian diaspora. When migration of a population takes place, it is natural that the intangible heritage travels with it. Intangible heritage is basically part of our cultural heritage which comprises of oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. The present study deals with the intangible heritage of such a migrating population from India to the island of Mauritius who were sent there during 19th and early 20th century by the British colonizers to work on sugar plantations as indentured labourers. In changing times, Hindu diaspora faces lots of challenges to continue its intangible heritage in Mauritius because of the approach of the young generation towards western life style; but in spite of that the new generations of the Hindu diaspora in Mauritius follow and participate in all spheres of its intangible heritage. This paper deals with the approach of new generation of Hindu diaspora in Mauritius towards its intangible heritage. The paper will document and highlight the perception and practice of its intangible heritage by the new generation of Hindu diaspora in Mauritius and what are the continuity and change observed in them. The methodology of the study includes the critical analysis of the primary and secondary sources on the subject.

Key Words: Indian, Diaspora, Mauritius, Intangible Heritage, Continuity, Change

Introduction

Mauritius is located in the south west part of the Indian Ocean, 855 kilometers from the east of Madagascar and about 3900 kilometers south east of India. The location of the island is very important because it falls in the way of the navigable traders. Don Pedro Mascaregnas, a Portuguese navigator, discovered the island in 1507 CE. During the colonial period, the control of the island shifted from one hand to another i.e. from Portuguese to Dutch to French and finally to English. During the colonization of the island by the English, the Indians were brought there during 19th and early 20th century to work on sugar plantations as indentured laborers. As a result 450,000 Indian immigrants arrived in Mauritius between 1834 and 1910 (Hollup, 1994: 299). The latest statistics shows that approximately 48 percent of the country's population is Hindu, 26 percent Roman Catholic, 17 percent Muslim, and 6 percent non-Catholic Christian religious groups (Mauritius 2019 International Religious Freedom Report). Out of the total Hindu population, 60% are Hindi/Bhojpuri speaking population from eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, 33% from south India (Tamil and Telugu speaking people) and 7% from Maharashtra (Marathi speaking people).

During the time of migration, Indian in general and Hindu culture or tradition particular in the form of religion, language, dialect, food habits, dress codes, rites and rituals, festivals etc. also migrated to Mauritius along with the migrants. This culture or tradition is what we call the intangible heritage. As per one UNESCO Convention, Intangible Cultural Heritage includes:

- a) Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- b) Performing arts;
- c) Social practices, rituals and festive events;
- d) Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and
- e) Traditional craftsmanship. (UNESCO, 2003. Article 2.2)

Indians, wherever they go, maintain the culture of their homeland in harmony with the culture of their host land. Therefore, India's intangible heritage has become an integral part of Mauritius' diverse cultural landscape, creating a unique identity that reflects the country's multiculturalism. It is reflected by the fact that 'Indo-Mauritian people are currently following the same Indian culture' (Parekh, Singh, & Vertovec, 2003).

Intangible Heritage of Hindu Diaspora in Mauritius

Almost all the intangible heritage of the Hindus which are celebrated as festivals, have rooted in some legends, myths and classical religious scriptures or traditions. Overall message of these festivals is the victory of the good over the evil. Other observances of the intangible heritage in the form of rites, rituals and practices have their religious connotations as well. So far as the worshipping of the gods and goddesses and observance of ceremonies are concerned, Hindu diaspora in Mauritius 'worships many gods and goddesses such as Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva and other puranic ceremonies' (Hazareesingh, 1966). Some of the important festivals, rites, rituals and practice as followed in Mauritius' thriving Hindu community are elaborated below.

Maha Shivaratri

Maha Shivaratri is one of the most important religious festivals celebrated in Mauritius. It is observed on the 14th day of the Hindu calendar month of Phalguna which is equivalent to the month of February or March in the Gregorian calendar. Maha Shivaratri is the celebration of the sacred Great Night of Lord Siva—The Destroyer, one of the Trinities in Hinduism, the other two being Brahma—The Creator and Vishnu—The Preserver. This is the only Hindu religious festival embodying a pilgrimage to a sacred site on the island (Eisenlohr. 2004). And that sacred site is Pari Talao which was later renamed as Ganga Talao also popularly known as Great Bassin, located in the district of Savanne. During the 7 days festival, lakhs of devotees of Lord Shiva, fetch the holy water from Ganga Talao and then offer it to the sacred linga, the phallic representation of Lord Shiva, in either the temples where they reside (Dulthumun. 2016) or the temples near Ganga Talao.



Ganga Talao (Grand Bassin), Savanne, Mauritius (Source: <https://mauritiusattractions.com>)

What are the changes observed in the celebration of Maha Shivaratri in Mauritius? First, Mauritius is the only country in the world where Maha Shivaratri is celebrated for 7 days while in other places including India, it is a one day celebration. Second, we can observe the change about the locational aspect of this celebration of intangible heritage Maha Shivaratri in Mauritius. In India, river Ganga is the most sacred river and the water from that river is collected by the devotee for the sacred ablution of Shiv lingas in the temples across the country. But, in Mauritius, there are no majestic rivers like that of Ganga. Hence, the Indian diaspora chose a crater lake in the center of Mauritius, naming it Ganga Talao to fill the vacuum created by the absence of a sacred river like Ganga in their host country. To make it sacred like Ganga, in 1972, the then Prime Minister of Mauritius, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, brought Ganga (Holy) water from Gomukh, India, and mixed it with the water of Pari Talao and renamed it as Ganga Talao (<https://defimedia.info>). Another important belief by the Mauritian Hindus is that the small island on the Ganga Talao takes the shape of a crocodile (Claveyrolas, 2018. p.33) as the vehicle of Ganga is crocodile.

Divali

Divali festival or the festival of lights is one of the most important festivals celebrated by the Indian diaspora in Mauritius. As per the Hindu calendar, the celebration of the festival starts in the 13th of Kartik (October-November) every year. On *Dhanteras*, i.e. on the first day of the five

days Diwvali festival, Goddess of wealth, Laxmi is worshipped. Divali marks the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya after spending 14 years in the exile. It also symbolizes the victory of good over the evil; light over darkness as the Divali celebrations mark the victory of lord Rama over demon king Ravana. Divali also commemorates the killing of demon Naraka by lord Krishna. The celebrations include the lighting of series of earthen lamps or *diyas* at homes and temples, decorating houses with *rangolis* (making floral patterns on the floor of the house with powdered colors) along with preparation and relishing of delicacies. One of the major attractions of the festival is the display of fireworks especially involving the young generation. Although initially it was celebrated as a religious festival by the Hindu community alone, 'over the years *it* became a national event' (Hitillambeau-Mirthil, 2013). Now, Divali is celebrated by 'Mauritians of all origins and generations' (Ramkissoon, H. 2015, p. 40). Divali is also declared as a national holiday in Mauritius.



Diwali Decorations at Triolet, Mauritius (Source: Danial Shah)

Holi

Although Holi is a Hindu festival of colors rooted in India, it is a transcultural and transnational festival in Mauritius. All spectrums of the Mauritian society irrespective of their religion take part in this grand festival. It is celebrated during the month of Phalguna (March) every year. This festival is associated with the Narasimha (man-lion) incarnation of lord Vishnu and the legend of demon king Hiranyakashipu and his wicked sister Holika. One day before the celebration of Holi, the festival of Holika Dahan takes place in the evening. On the day of Holi, people smear *gulaal* (dry powdered colors) and spray wet colors through *pichkaris* (water jets) made of local Mauritian bamboos, on each other with jubilation. *Gujiya* (a type of dumpling made with semolina flour which is roasted in Ghee and stuffed with a combination of nuts, roasted dried fruits, coconut and khoya), is very tasty delicacy associated with the Holi festival. During the celebration of Holi, large gatherings of people sing Holi songs with the accompaniment drums and cymbals.



Holika Dahan (Source: mauritiusattractions.com)

Thaipooosam Cavadee

A major annual festival of the Hindus of Tamil origin in Mauritius is Thaipooosam Cavadee. Etymologically, ‘Thai’ means the month of January/February and ‘Pusam’ means a star. Cavadee or kavadi means to carry a piece of wood. Thaipooosam is celebrated with all austerity and rituals in all the Murugan (Kartikeya) temples across the world. As per the Tamil legends, lord Murugan vanquished demon Tarakasooran on the day of Thaipooosam. Cavadee is an integral part of Thaipooosam. In Tamil, Cavadee means carrying weight on the shoulder to propitiate lord Murugan. A Cavadee is ‘made of arched bamboo stalk strengthened by rods and adorned with colorful

flowers, sandalwood paste, peacock feathers, lime, coconut leaves, brass bells and other accessories with covered vessels hanging from each corner containing milk, sugar, rice, sandal, banana, etc. ([https:// www.holidify.com/pages/thaipooosam-cavadee-in-mauritius-3337.html](https://www.holidify.com/pages/thaipooosam-cavadee-in-mauritius-3337.html)). It is also believed that the devotees who carry their Cavadees to the Murugan temple, their wishes are granted.



Celebration of Cavadee Festival in Mauritius (Source: <https://traveltriangle.com>)

Other Hindu Festivals

The Marathi speaking Hindu diaspora in Mauritius celebrate festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi, Gondhal and Gudi Padwa. *Ganesh Chaturthi* is a ten days religious festival celebrated between the months of August and September. The festival is marked by rituals and prayers. *Gondhal* festival is usually performed in honour of goddess Durga also known as Mother Bhawani, during the night of the marriage of the eldest and/or of the youngest son of most families of the Marathi community (IJMCER, 2021. Vol.3, Issue. 1. p. 181). Gudi Padwa is the Marathi New Year celebrated in the month of March or April (Chaitra in Hindu calendar). It marks the end of the old harvesting season and the beginning of the new one. Similarly, Ugadi (New Year of Telugu and Kannada speaking Hindus) is celebrated in Mauritius with great pomp and pleasure.

Telugu speaking Hindus in Mauritius celebrate a number of religious festivals out of which *Rambhajanam* (groups of singers sing devotional songs in praise of Lord Rama), *Ammoru Panduga* (celebrated in honour of Goddess Kali to obtain blessings and protection against epidemics and natural calamities) and *Simhadri Appnah* (celebrated in honour of Narashimha, an incarnation of lord Vishnu) are important.

Rite and Rituals

So far as the performance of the rites and rituals of the Hindu diaspora in Mauritius is concerned, most important rituals are *Kalimai* worship (worshipping of Goddess Kali), worship of *Sitala Mata* (the goddess of Measles and Smallpox) and *Baharia Pooja* (a folk ritual performed to protect workers from injuries and accidents and ensures that villagers are protected from diseases, natural calamities and death).

Food

In Mauritius, a number of traditional Indian foods are very popular. The Indian diaspora has 'preserved their traditional foods and tastes by following these conventional foods, such as Samosa, Pickles, Laddu, Tomato paste, Chutney, Rice, and so on (Tiwari. 2020, p.101). Roti, Paratha, Bhajiya and Samoussa are also favourite among the Hindu diaspora in Mauritius.

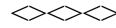
Dress

The way of dressing up by the Indian diaspora in Mauritius has also been changed from traditional to modern. Men therefore rejected the costumes worn by agricultural workers, namely the loin cloth (*dhoti*) and the small turban (*pagri*), in favour of the loose shirt (*kurta*) and pants (*pyjamas*), assorted with different head dresses and a beard. Women adopted long skirts (*lehenga*) with a blouse (*peignoir*) instead of the traditional saris.

Concluding Reflections

Hindu diaspora in Mauritius follows the intangible heritage practices of the homeland. Due to the impact of modernity and in the context of new physiographical features of the host land, many of the Hindu practices have been diluted to some extent. This could more be reflected in dress code and approach of the new generation towards the culture and tradition of their forefathers. Several Hindu organizations like Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, Ramakrishna and Chinmayananda Missions, The Arya Samaj, Swami Lakshmanacharya Vishwa Santi Foundation, Swami

Lakshmanacharya Vishwa Santi Foundation (SLVF) Krishnanand Ashram etc. (<https://www.hinduismtoday.com>) are working tirelessly to minimize the impact of modernity on the age old tradition of Hindus in Mauritius.



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