



RESEARCH ARTICLE

GIRMITIYA TO GOVERNMENT: A JOURNEY OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN MAURITIUS

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 27th March, 2026
Received in revised form
24th April, 2026
Accepted 25th May, 2026
Published online 30th June, 2026

Keywords:

Government, Girmitiya, Diaspora,
Plantation, Mauritius, Indenture, Identity.

ABSTRACT

What does it mean for a people to begin as property and end as parliament? That is, in essence, the question this paper sets out to answer. Girmitiya community of Mauritius men and women transported from India in the nineteenth century to cut sugarcane under conditions they had not chosen and could barely survive — traced one of the most remarkable arcs in the history of any diaspora. From the holds of ships to the halls of government: the distance is not merely geographic. It is civilizational. This paper traces that journey through five figures who did much of the intellectual and cultural work that made it possible: Abhimanyu Unnuth, Khal Torabully, Dev Virahsawmy, Brij V. Lal, and Pandit Rajendra Arun. Each worked differently — through fiction, theory, theatre, historiography, and institutional pedagogy — but together they constructed the scaffolding through which a traumatized laboring community rebuilt itself into a governing one. Their contributions illuminate four themes that run through this analysis: resilience as something far more active than endurance; memory as a living, political inheritance rather than passive nostalgia; identity as a negotiation between roots and routes; and political empowerment as something that must first be spoken before it can be legislated. The Mauritian case, this paper argues in its conclusion, is not just a local success story. It has become a paradigm — for UNESCO, for postcolonial scholarship, and for every diaspora community in the world still navigating the distance between where it came from and where it belongs.

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Citation: Akash Mishra and Shatakshi Anand. 2026. "Girmitiya to Government: A Journey of Indian Diaspora in Mauritius". *International Journal of Current Research*, 18, (06), 37579-37584.

INTRODUCTION

On November 2, 1834, a ship called the Atlas docked in Mauritius carrying thirty-six Indian workers. British colonial administrators watched with satisfaction. They had been searching for a labor solution ever since the abolition of slavery had emptied the sugar plantations, and this a system of bound, contractual indenture was the answer they believed they had found. They called it "the great experiment," which tells you something about how they regarded the people involved. The experiment, as experiments go, was brutally effective. Within four years, over 25,000 laborers had been shipped to Mauritius. By the time the system was wound down in the 1920s, 453,063 Indian migrants had passed through the island — more than to any other single British colony. The descendants of those workers, the Girmitiyas, named for the girit or "agreement" their forebears signed, now make up roughly two-thirds of Mauritius's population. They provide most of its Prime Ministers. The arc from "coolie" to head of government is not metaphorical. It happened. But how? That is the question conventional political history struggles to answer on its own. Numbers and elections tell part of the story demographic weight, franchise extension, party formation. What they cannot account for is the interior life of a community: how it made sense of its suffering, what it told

itself about who it was, and how those stories became the foundation for political claims. That interior work literary, theoretical, linguistic, historiographical, institutional is what this paper examines. Stuart Hall's observation that cultural identity is constituted through "becoming as well as being" is more than theoretical shorthand here. It describes exactly what happened in Mauritius: an identity continuously remade through history, culture, and the exercise of power. The five figures at the center of this analysis Unnuth, Torabully, Virahsawmy, Lal, and Arun were not politicians in the conventional sense, though some held office. They were, more precisely, the people who made politics possible: who gave a community the language, the memory, the dignity, and the ethical framework to govern. Resilience in their hands was never passive. Memory in their work was never merely sad. Identity, for all of them, was something to be claimed, not simply inherited. And political empowerment, crucially, came first as narrative authority the right to tell your own story before it arrived as parliamentary power. The physical anchor for this analysis is Aapravasi Ghat, the immigration depot in Port Louis through which nearly half a million indentured workers passed between 1834 and 1920. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2006, it stands now as a monument to both devastation and survival. Historians like Hugh Tinker did not mince words about what the indenture

system was: a "new system of slavery." Aapravasi Ghat is where that system began, in Mauritius. The story of what came after it is what this paper tells.

Literary and Cultural Representation: A community's political ascent rarely begins in a parliament. It begins in the stories it tells about itself in novels, poems, plays, and public discourse long before any vote is cast. The Girmitiya community in Mauritius is a case study in exactly this process. The five figures examined here did not simply comment on a transformation that was happening around them. They were, in important respects, the architects of it.

Abhimanyu Unnuth: Chronicler of Plantation Trauma and Resistance

Abhimanyu Unnuth was born in 1937 and died in 2018, and in between he did something that no formal education which he never received could have taught him to do: he gave the Girmitiya experience a literature worthy of it. His starting point was personal. As a boy, he followed his mother to the sugarcane fields and watched the estate management treat the workers as something less than human. That early witness planted, in his own words, "an immense anger" that never left him. The anger became fuel. Over decades, he produced a body of work vast enough to earn him the epithet "Premchand of Mauritius," and practical enough that he founded two literary magazines *Rimjhim* for children, *Vasant* for adults simply because the platforms for Girmitiya cultural expression did not otherwise exist.

His trilogy *Lal Pasina Blood-Red Sweat* in translation is where the plantation world lives most fully. The novel does not aestheticize suffering; it renders it plainly, so that readers, as Unnuth intended, "see and feel the heartbeats of the cane workers." The laborers in its pages endure backbreaking work under a blazing sun, eat food that is barely edible, and watch India recede into something unattainable a fantasy of origin that cannot be revisited. The fractured sense of belonging to it produces, is captured in a line from the workers' own songs: "When you sucked the juice / from the cane, foreman, / you did not leave me any fiber..." It is a small lyric, but it carries a world of exhaustion and dispossession inside it.

Yet Unnuth's characters do not simply suffer. Their resilience finds expression in forms the plantation managers likely never noticed folk songs like Kissan's lament ("The bird flies away, its nest destroyed. He has gone to seek refuge elsewhere..."), which functioned as cultural archives of grief and endurance. Historians have documented similar forms of quiet resistance across indentured communities: desertion, vagrancy, informal maroonage survival strategies that looked, from the outside, like disorder, but were in fact assertions of a self that refused to be fully owned. The novel's pivot comes when Pushpa, a woman transformed in the text into a figure of near-divine fury "the goddess Chandi" shames the men around her into action and announces she will confront the plantation boss herself. The scene is brief, but its significance is enormous. It is the moment the community stops absorbing its circumstances and begins questioning them. Pushpa's question — "how could we be so poor in a country that had the means to build such temples? Were our parents pushed out?" is not just a character's grievance. It is the first grammar of a political consciousness. Unnuth's stage play *Goonga Itihas* (Mute History), performed

at the 150th Anniversary Celebration of Indian Indentured Arrival, extended this consciousness into public memory, turning silence into testimony on stages in both Mauritius and India.

The recognition that eventually came to him tells its own story. The Vishwa Hindi Sammaan (1996), the Dr. George Grierson Award (1998), the Sahitya Bhushan Award (2000), the Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Award (1997), the National Award of Mauritius (2018), and most significantly an honorary Sahitya Akademi Fellowship from India in 2014, awarded for his "eminence in the global Hindi literary sphere." Each of these honors marks something beyond personal achievement. Together, they represent the moment Girmitiya cultural production moved from the margins to the mainstream a journey, in miniature, of the community itself.

Khal Torabully: Theorist of Coolitude and Transoceanic Identity

There is a particular kind of intellectual courage required to take the worst thing that was ever said about your people the slur, the category of contempt and turn it into the foundation of a theory. Khal Torabully did exactly that. Born in 1956, he coined the term "Coolitude" and in doing so transformed "coolie" from an instrument of dehumanization into "a cultural and aesthetic paradigm of indentured Indian identities." The move is deliberate and structurally similar to what Négritude did for the word "nègre" a generation earlier: to seize the label, empty it of its poison, and refill it with pride. Coolitude begins, for Torabully, with the ocean. He is insistent on this: "it is impossible to understand the essence of coolitude without charting the coolies' voyage across the seas." The crossing of the Kala Pani the black waters was traditionally understood in Indian cultural terms as a rupture, a spiritual severing from home and caste. Torabully reinterprets it as something else entirely: a founding event, a space in which old hierarchies dissolved and new solidarities formed. The ship was not only a vehicle of transport. It was, he argues, the first classroom of a new identity. The identity that emerged from that crossing is, in Torabully's formulation, irreducibly plural. His own self-description "Creole by my rigging, Indian by my mast, European by my spar, Mauritian by my quest and French by my exile" is not a confession of confusion. It is a manifesto of what he calls "cross-cultural vagabondage": the idea that diasporic identity is not a fixed point of origin but a moving constellation of relationships. It is not about where you came from. It is about what you became in the crossing, and what you keep becoming in the land you now call home. His poetry in *Chair Corail*, *Fragments Coolies* gives this theory its pulse: "je suis la bannie l'exclue l'exilée / décide a me perdre dans l'anonymat de l'engageé" "I am the banished, excluded, exiled / Who decided to lose myself in the anonymity of indenture." The lines hold the paradox that Torabully builds his entire framework around: the woman who chose anonymity did not thereby lose herself. She found something new in the losing. His other lines "a memory lost in advance," "a memory forever recalled / in tomorrow's journey home" articulate the same tension: the homeland is genuinely gone, and yet it is never fully absent. From that unresolvable paradox, a new society must be built. This is, for this paper's analysis, the crucial insight Coolitude offers: trauma is not the conclusion of the Girmitiya story. It is the raw material. The ocean becomes not just a site of crossing but the first geography of a collective destiny that would unfold, over generations, on Mauritian soil. His collaboration with historian Marina Carter produced *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*

(2002), now a foundational text in diaspora studies. The framework has since traveled widely into films, into academic curricula, into the understanding of indentured legacies across the Caribbean and the Pacific. It filled a gap that creolization theory had left open: a vocabulary for the specifically indentured experience, distinct from but in dialogue with the histories of slavery and colonialism.

Dev Virahsawmy: Architect of Creole Linguistic and Political Agency:

Dev Virahsawmy (1942–2023) understood something that is easy to understate: the language a community speaks in public is not a neutral medium. It is a political choice. To be forced to petition, argue, and legislate in someone else's tongue is to begin every conversation already diminished. Virahsawmy spent his life fighting that diminishment, and he did it through Kreol Morisien — Mauritian Creole — which he regarded not as a dialect or a stepping stone to French or English, but as a complete, sovereign language deserving of literature, philosophy, and law. He was fluent in French and English, which meant his commitment to Kreol was not a limitation. It was a declaration. Over a lifetime, he produced an estimated 4,000 literary documents — some 3,000 poems and 40 plays — entirely in Kreol, and translated into it works including Shakespeare's plays and the Bhagavad Gita. That last item is worth pausing on: to translate the Bhagavad Gita into Kreol is to assert that Kreol can hold sacred weight, that it is not a lesser language for lesser thoughts. It is an act of cultural sovereignty. His metaphor for Mauritian identity was the rainbow — deployed in his Kreol adaptation of Joseph and the Amazing Techni-colour Dreamcoat. Each color in a rainbow is distinct; remove any one and the whole is diminished. Blend them all into a uniform mixture and you get something that has no color at all — what he called "a bland, colourless, insipid hodge-podge." This was his critique of assimilationist nationalism, the slogans that demanded "one people, one nation" at the price of erasing what made each people what they were. "Unity in Diversity" was his counter-slogan, and it was not decorative. It was a political philosophy. His 1991 play *Toufann* is where this philosophy finds its sharpest expression. A postcolonial rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* set in Mauritius, the play transforms Caliban into Kalibann — a figure who speaks a rich, combative Creole and delivers one of the most direct speeches in the Mauritian theatrical canon:

"Mo pa pou koz angle, mo pa pou koz fransé... Mo langaz mo lasasinn!... Aster la mo koumans mo lagér kont bann lang kolonial." (I will not speak English, I will not speak French... My language is my weapon!... Now I begin my war against colonial languages.)

Kalibann's refusal is not mere stubbornness. It is a philosophical argument: the colonial languages encode a hierarchy in which the Creole speaker is always already subordinate. To insist on Kreol is to reject that hierarchy at its root. The plantation tongue, the language of the Girmitiya laborer, becomes not a mark of low status but an instrument of liberation. And the parallel to the community's broader political journey is precise: full participation in governance requires the authority to speak, publicly and legitimately, in your own voice.

Virahsawmy's politics matched his art. A founding member of the Mauritian Militant Movement and its first elected representative in 1970, he organized strikes, endured imprisonment, and later served as Cultural Advisor resigning from that post when the government refused to advance Kreol as a national language. The resignation mattered. It demonstrated that for him, cultural recognition and political empowerment were not separate tracks. They were the same track.

Brij Vilash Lal: Historian of Jahaji Bhai Solidarity and Diasporic Consciousness:

Brij V. Lal (1952–2021) came to Girmitiya history from the inside his own grandparents had been indentured. This did not make his scholarship sentimental. It made it precise. Celebrated as "the premier scholar of the Indian diaspora," Lal brought to the study of indenture the same rigorous attention to evidence that the best historians bring to any subject, combined with a personal understanding of what was at stake in getting it right. His most important conceptual contribution is also, on the surface, one of the simplest: the jahaji bhai. Ship-brother. The bonds forged between strangers thrown together for weeks in the hold of a vessel crossing the Kala Pani were, Lal documents, not temporary. The shared ordeal created a form of kinship a "sense of togetherness, of being passengers in the same boat" that outlasted the voyage itself. When those workers arrived and were dispersed across plantations, they carried the jahaji bhai network with them. It became the social infrastructure of an entirely new community, one that had no precedent in India because it transcended the caste and regional divisions that had previously defined social life. This transformation was neither simple nor painless. Old hierarchies did not dissolve without friction. But Lal documents how, over time, "notions of purity and impurity, taboos regarding food, diet, social space, the rituals of prayer and worship collapsed over time to be replaced by new norms and conventions." What emerged was a community with an internal unity that the plantation system had not anticipated and could not easily suppress. That unity — social capital built from solidarity was the precondition for everything that came after: for strikes, for political organization, for the eventual capture of democratic power. The deeper argument in Lal's work, and the one most consequential for the community's political self-understanding, is expressed in a passage that deserves to be read slowly:

"The indentured immigrants were not simply hapless victims of a monstrous system... They were actors in their own right, making choices... and shaping the contours of their new lives within the constraints that entrapped them." (Lal, 78)

This is not a reassuring platitude. It is a historiographical claim with serious implications. If the ancestors exercised agency if they chose, resisted, organized, and built then their descendants are not the inheritors of victimhood. They are the inheritors of agency. A community that understands its past in these terms does not need to petition for the right to govern. It can assert it. Lal's historiography provided the intellectual foundation for exactly that assertion. He also pushed back, methodically, against the colonial stereotype that indentured laborers were drawn exclusively from the lowest social strata. His research into the diverse origins of migrants — including his magnum opus *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey Through*

Indenture in Fiji, praised as "Pacific history at its best: rigorous and critical, informative and involved" restored dignity to a history that had been systematically stripped of it. The Brij V. Lal Prize for Indian Indentureship Studies, established in his honor, ensures that this work continues.

Pandit Rajendra Arun: Institutionalizing Ramayanic Heritage: There is a particular kind of cultural work that only institutions can do: make things permanent. Pandit Rajendra Arun understood this. His lifelong dedication to popularizing the Ramcharitmanas Tulsidas's version of the Ramayana through radio broadcasts and public discourse was not merely devotional. It was strategic. The Ramayana had been the spiritual spine of the Girmitiya community through indenture; in the baithkas, the informal community gathering places of the plantation era, laborers had recited it for comfort and coherence. Arun's achievement was to take what had been a community's private sustenance and give it the force of law. In 2001, by Act of Parliament (Act No. 7), the Ramayana Centre was established making Mauritius the only country in the world with national legislation specifically devoted to promoting the Ramayana. This is not a minor bureaucratic fact. It is a statement about what a nation considers worth protecting, and it locates Girmitiya heritage at the center of that calculation. The Centre is not a museum. It is active. Weekly Ramayana Satsang sessions, monthly observances, annual festivals, Valmiki Jayanti, Ram Navami and educational programs including Bal Sanskar classes for children, chanting and interpretation courses, and instruction in Hindu Dharma all run continuously. The point is not ritual for its own sake. It is the transmission of an ethical vocabulary across generations: the concepts of dharma (duty), maryada (propriety), and satya (truth) that, as Arun articulated, must "guide our family life and our public conduct" and "give us the moral confidence to contribute to our nation."

The concept of Ramrajya principled rule, good governance is what transforms this cultural work into political philosophy. Invoked by everyone from Mahatma Gandhi to Mauritian heads of state, Ramrajya provides an ethical framework for leadership derived not from Western liberal theory but from the community's own foundational text. A community that can articulate what good governance looks like, in its own terms, is a community ready to practice it. The physical infrastructure of the Centre the Riziya Teelock Learning Complex, the tortoise-shaped Ram Mandir built from pink Jaipur sandstone anchors this framework in soil and stone. The inaugural ceremonies, attended by Prime Ministers and a President, mark the culmination of something that began in the cramped quarters of a plantation baithka. The Ramayana, once recited in secret for solace, is now housed in a building inaugurated by heads of state. That is a measure of how far the community has traveled. And the concept embedded in that text of governance as a moral responsibility, not merely a political arrangement is perhaps the most lasting gift the Girmitiya intellectual tradition offers to Mauritius.

The Transition from Cultural Resistance to Political Organization Cultural resilience and political organization are not the same thing, but they are not separable either. The Girmitiya community's move from plantation survival to democratic power was not a single leap. It was a long

accumulation, each stage building on the last, with specific moments serving as catalysts. By the 1870s, demographic weight and growing economic participation had given the community something it had not previously possessed: a sense that its situation was not fixed. The oppression that had seemed inescapable began to look, in Paulo Freire's useful phrase, like "a limiting situation which they can transform." The Constitution of 1885 made the political stakes concrete and infuriating: despite constituting 69% of the population, only around 300 Indians qualified to vote, blocked by property requirements and the demand for signatures in English. The exclusion was systematic. So was the response. Mahatma Gandhi's visit in 1901 mattered less for any specific action it produced than for the message it sent: that the condition of Indians in Mauritius was being watched, that it connected to a larger movement, and that political participation not just cultural survival — was the appropriate response. Two Indians, Ajam Bigrajee and H. Sakir, were elected as Councillors that same year. The Manilal Maganlall Doctor arrived in 1907 and sharpened the community's legal and political consciousness further, through his journal *Hindustani* which did not shy from its masthead slogan: "Liberty of Individuals! Fraternity of Men!! Equality of Races!!!" By 1921, R. Gujadhur and Dunputh Lallah, both descendants of indentured workers, had been elected to the council. The trajectory was set.

Trade Unionism and the Politicization of Labor

The depression of the 1930s, and the collapse of sugar prices that came with it, accelerated what the political exclusions of the 1880s had begun. The 1937 strikes were not simply labor actions. They were the moment when economic grievance and political consciousness fused. Indo-Mauritian workers moved into the union movement and made it something it had not quite been before: a platform not just for wage negotiations but for the assertion of civic dignity. Political consciousness, at this stage, was being reproduced on multiple tracks simultaneously. Literature and art carried the memory of resistance. Unions and party structures formalized it. And intergenerational transmission through oral history, family narrative, and eventually formal education ensured it was not lost between generations but deepened and adapted. When Swami Krishnanandji Maharaj distributed 100,000 pocket Ramayanas across Mauritius in the 1960s and 1970s, placing a sacred text in the hands of families who might otherwise have no access to it, he was participating in the same project: keeping a community's sense of itself alive and coherent across time. The collective celebration of Diwali and Holi, the formation of cultural associations, the institutionalization of Hindu and Hindi education each of these created what scholars now call "postmemory": not the passive inheritance of a painful past, but an active, strategic construction of shared heritage. Descendants of laborers who had not themselves lived through indenture could nevertheless feel it as formative could "imaginatively complete" their ancestors' experiences, as Marianne Hirsch puts it and draw from that inheritance the solidarity and historical legitimacy needed for political life. The memory of indenture, once a source of shame, became a source of strength. The "coolie" became, in the fullest possible sense, the governing class. The results, internationally, are no longer surprising. "Descendants of these migrants have risen to the ranks of Prime Ministers and Presidents, judges, civil servants, prominent business leaders," as official commemorations note.

In Mauritius specifically, the political trajectory has a distinctly Bihari character: most of the island's Prime Ministers since independence have been descendants of migrants from Bihar, which sent a particularly large contingent of workers. Since 1968, Mauritius has been governed almost without exception by leaders of Indian origin. The experiment that British colonial administrators designed to serve their own interests produced, in the end, something they could not have predicted: a governing class shaped by the very people they had intended to exploit.

Identity Negotiation: From "Coolie" to "Mauritian of Indian Origin" Identity, for a diaspora community, is never simply given. It must be argued for, constructed, and in cases like the Girmitiyas — rescued from the wreckage of a dehumanizing system that sought to reduce human beings to units of labor. The negotiation this community undertook was between two poles that might have seemed irreconcilable: the pull of Indian roots, of ancestral language and religion and cultural memory, and the reality of Mauritius as home a genuinely new place, shaped by encounters and adaptations that had no precedent in India. Torabully and Virahsawmy worked the hybridity side of this tension. Coolitude insisted that the crossing itself the trauma, the displacement, the enforced mixing of castes and regions was not only a wound but a source. Virahsawmy insisted that Kreol was not a degraded form of French but a language in its own right, and that Mauritian identity was irreducibly creolized, a rainbow rather than a monoculture. Their work dismantled the "coolie" label from within by claiming the very experiences it was meant to diminish as the foundation of something new and proud.

Unnuth, Lal, and Arun worked the rootedness side. The Hindi literary tradition, the Ramayana, the historiography of indentured agency these preserved a sense of continuity with India that was not nostalgia but identity. Stuart Hall's formulation is apt: diaspora identity is not a fixed state of "being" but a continuous process of "becoming." Girmitiya community became Mauritian not by abandoning what it had brought from India, but by weaving it into something new. The synthesis these five figures achieved between hybridity and rootedness, between Coolitude and the Ramayana Centre, between Kreol and Hindi is what scholars have noted when they observe that the Indian-origin population in Mauritius has moved, over time, beyond the classic diaspora framework. They are no longer simply Indians abroad. They are Mauritian natives, in the fullest sense: people whose cultural heritage is Indian, whose political identity is Mauritian, and whose presence in governance is the expression of both.

Aapravasi Ghat: Material Memory and UNESCO Recognition Memory needs places. It needs stone and steps and space you can stand in, where the past is not merely recalled but felt. Aapravasi Ghat, the immigration depot in Port Louis, is that place for the Girmitiya diaspora the point through which nearly half a million workers entered Mauritius between 1834 and 1920, and through which the entire subsequent history of Indo-Mauritian life was channeled. UNESCO inscribed it as a World Heritage Site in 2006, recognizing its Outstanding Universal Value as "the sole surviving example of this unique modern diaspora." The physical site is modest a flight of fourteen steps, some restored walls, a small museum but the steps are what matter. They are, in the site's own description, "highly symbolic": every laborer who arrived had to descend them

before entering the depot. To stand on those steps now is to perform, however briefly, an act of post-memory to feel the weight of an experience you did not live, transmitted through stone. The UNESCO designation did more than preserve a building. It elevated a local trauma to global significance, insisting that what happened here mattered not just for Mauritius but for the world's understanding of migration, exploitation, and the making of modern societies. The Indentured Labour Route Project, launched in connection with the site's anniversary, extends this logic transnationally connecting Mauritius to the Caribbean, to Fiji, to South Africa, to every place where the same system deposited its human cargo. Aapravasi Ghat is no longer only a Mauritian landmark. It is a node in a global network of memory, a place where the Girmitiya story becomes legible as something universal.

An Integrated Resilience Framework: What the five figures in this paper achieved, taken together, was not simply influence in their respective fields. They built, sequentially and synergistically, a complete architecture of Girmitiya empowerment. Unnuth gave the plantation experience a literature — ensuring that the suffering was recorded, that the anger was preserved, and that the first movements toward resistance were recognized as such. On that foundation, Torabully built a theory of identity that transformed the trauma of the ocean crossing from a wound into a source. Virahsawmy took that identity and gave it a language — insisting that Kreol was not a compromise but a sovereign tongue, and that political inclusion was hollow without linguistic recognition. Lal provided the historical framework that grounded all of this in evidence: demonstrating that the ancestors were not victims but agents, and that their descendants therefore inherited not shame but resourcefulness. And Arun, finally, institutionalized the ethical dimension — embedding in state law the concept of Ramrajya, of governance as moral responsibility, derived from the community's deepest cultural resource.

The questions that every diaspora community must answer — who are we, how do we speak, by what values shall we lead — found, in the Girmitiya case, precise and powerful answers. Lal answered the first: historical agents, not hapless victims. Virahsawmy answered the second: in Kreol, in our own tongue, on our own terms. Arun answered the third: by the principles of dharma and Ramrajya, by the ethics of the Ramayana. Together, these answers equipped a community of plantation workers' descendants to walk into a parliament and govern. The Mauritian case is, by any measure, extraordinary. But its lessons are transferable. Any diaspora community navigating the distance between marginalization and power can find in the Girmitiya trajectory a model — not for imitation, but for the recognition that cultural resilience, historical consciousness, and ethical vision are not luxuries. They are the very conditions of political transformation.

CONCLUSION

From Local Anecdote to Global Paradigm: What Mauritius demonstrates, at the end of this analysis, is something that postcolonial theory has often asserted but rarely shown in such complete form: that a community forged in exploitation need not be defined by it. The Girmitiyas arrived as instruments of a

colonial economy. They left or rather, their descendants did as the people who run it. That transition was not merely demographic, though demographic weight was essential. It was cultural, intellectual, and above all discursive: built word by word, theory by theory, institution by institution, across generations.

The paper corrects a persistent error in thinking about diaspora and victimhood: the assumption that trauma and agency are mutually exclusive, that a community deeply wounded by its history cannot simultaneously be a community of historical actors. The Girmitiya case insists otherwise. Cultural hybridity and cultural rootedness, far from being incompatible, operate here in productive tension: Coolitude and the Ramayana Centre are not contradictions. They are the two wings that lifted a community from the plantation to the parliament. The trajectory "Girmitiya to Government" was not inevitable. It was made. Through Unnuth's fiction, the suffering was witnessed. Through Torabully's theory, it was given meaning. Through Virahsawmy's theatre, the right to speak in one's own tongue was asserted. Through Lal's historiography, the agency of the ancestors was recovered. Through Arun's institution, the ethics of governance were grounded in the community's own spiritual inheritance. Each of these was a choice a refusal to let indenture be the last word. In elevating their local story to universal significance, these five figures have offered something beyond Mauritius. They have provided the vocabulary, the frameworks, and the policy models for understanding how diaspora communities everywhere negotiate the distance between displacement and belonging, between trauma and governance. The Girmitiya paradigm is not a Mauritian story that the world happens to find interesting. It is a human story, told first in Mauritius, about what becomes possible when a people refuse — generation after generation, in a hundred different registers — to be only what their oppressors intended them to be. The journey from the holds of the Atlas to the Prime Minister's office in Port Louis took not quite two centuries. It was navigated, in the end, through language, memory, and moral imagination. That is the lesson Mauritius offers. And it is one worth carrying.

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