



## SUSTAINING INFLUENCE: THE GIRMITIYA LEGACY AND INDIA'S SOFT POWER IN WEST BENGAL AND BEYOND

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

This study examines how Girmitiya communities, descendants of Indian indentured labourers, contribute to India's soft power and cultural diplomacy, with a specific focus on West Bengal. After the abolition of slavery in 1834, more than half a million Indians were transported to various British colonies as indentured labourers. Despite exploitation and harsh conditions, these communities have preserved their cultural identity, adapting to new environments. The research demonstrates how Girmitiya maintain and promote Indian cultural practices through traditional festivals, cuisine, and arts, establishing themselves as important cultural ambassadors. In West Bengal, their influence is particularly evident through cultural exchanges and festivals such as Durga Puja and Diwali. The study uses qualitative assessment methods, analysing government reports, interviews, and cultural initiatives. The findings reveal that Girmitiya communities significantly enhance India's soft power through their cultural preservation efforts and integration with host societies. His legacy helps strengthen diplomatic relations between India and nations that are home to significant Indian diaspora populations.

**Keywords:** *Indentured Labour, Girmitiya, Soft Power, Indian Diaspora, Cultural Identity*

#### Introduction

The term Girmitiya refers to Indian indentured labourers who were transported by the British Empire to various colonies between the 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, primarily to work on plantations. This system emerged after the abolition of slavery in 1833, which created a significant labour shortage in the colonies. More than two million Indians, predominantly from regions such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, embarked on perilous journeys across oceans, enticed by promises of better opportunities and land ownership. However, upon arrival, many faced exploitation, harsh working conditions, and broken promises. The word "Gurmit" itself is derived from a corruption of "agreement," highlighting the contractual nature of their migration, which often resulted in a cycle of debt and servitude. Despite enduring immense hardships, Girmitiya has played a crucial role in the economic development of the colonies they settled in, while also preserving and adapting their cultural identities. Their legacy continues to influence cultural diplomacy and soft power dynamics between India and its diaspora today. Soft power, a term popularized by Joseph Nye, refers to the country's ability to influence others through cultural appeal, values, and foreign policies rather than coercion or military might. This concept is particularly significant in the realm of cultural diplomacy, where India leverages its rich heritage, diverse traditions, and democratic values to foster goodwill and strengthen international relationships. Through initiatives for example cultural exchanges, educational Programmes, and the promotion of Indian art, music, and cuisine, India seeks to enhance its global image and create a favourable environment for cooperation. The significance of India's soft power lies in its potential to build bridges across cultures, promote mutual understanding, and address global challenges collaboratively. In this context, the legacy of Girmitiyas – Indian indentured labourers who settled in various parts of the world – serves as a poignant example of how cultural ties can transcend borders and contribute to India's soft power narrative. Their enduring influence on local cultures and their role in fostering connections between India and its diaspora are crucial elements in understanding the broader implications of India's cultural diplomacy.

The study of the Girmitiya legacy is particularly relevant in the context of West Bengal, a region with deep historical ties to the Indian diaspora. This research aims to explore how the experiences of Girmitiya labourers – who were transported under the indenture system from India to various British colonies – have shaped cultural identities and contributed to India's soft power. By examining the socio-cultural dynamics in West Bengal, where many descendants of Girmitiyas reside, the study seeks to highlight the enduring impact of this migration on contemporary cultural diplomacy. Understanding these connections not only sheds light on the historical injustices faced by these labourers but also emphasizes their role in fostering cross-cultural exchanges that enhance India's global image. The relevance of this inquiry lies in its potential to inform current diplomatic strategies and cultural initiatives, recognizing the contributions of Girmitiyas as vital to India's narrative on the world stage.

The legacy of Girmitiyas, or Indian indentured labourers, has been a subject of increasing scholarly interest, particularly in the context of cultural identity and diaspora studies. Research highlights the profound impact of the Girmitiya experience on cultural dynamics within host countries and their influence on India's soft power. Notable studies, such as "Literature of Girmitiya History, Culture and Identity," explore the dislocation of cultural identity due to colonial hegemony, emphasizing how Girmitiyas navigated their identities amidst imposed cultural frameworks. Additionally, "Girmitiya Diaries: Intergenerational Trauma" delves into the psychological aspects of this legacy, examining how collective memory and trauma affect subsequent generations and contribute to cultural resilience. These works collectively underscore the significance of Girmitiyas in shaping not only their own identities but also enhancing India's cultural diplomacy through soft power.

This article examines the role of Girmitiya communities in India's soft power and cultural diplomacy, focusing on West Bengal. The hypothesis suggests that the cultural practices and preserved identities of these communities significantly enhance India's soft power, promoting stronger cultural diplomacy with nations with large Indian diaspora populations. The study uses qualitative assessment methods, such as government reports, interviews, and content analysis, to explore the influence of Girmitiya cultural legacies on India's soft power and cultural diplomacy initiatives in West Bengal.

### **Historical Background of Girmitiyas**

The Girmitiyas, a group of Indians, originated from the indentured servitude system that emerged after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834. British plantations faced labour shortages, which led to the recruitment of Indian workers with contracts that promised wages, housing, and eventual return to India. Many, however, faced exploitative conditions and harsh treatment. The first wave of indentured labourers began migrating to various colonies, including Fiji, Mauritius, and the Caribbean, beginning in the 1830s. This system facilitated the movement of over a million Indians and marked a critical transition in labour practices, replacing slavery with a form of forced labour that often reflected its exploitative nature. The Girmitiya experience encapsulates a complex interplay between migration, cultural exchange, and identity formation that continues to resonate in Indian diaspora communities today. The civil service, which lasted from the early 19th century until the 1920s, involved the transportation of over two million Indians, mostly "coolies", to various British colonies.

The indentured service system in British colonies between 1834 and 1917 gave rise to large Indian communities in countries such as Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Fiji. These communities created distinctive cultural identities, combining their Indian heritage with local customs. The Indian recruitment system significantly influenced the development of educational systems in diaspora communities, particularly in the Caribbean and South Africa. Schools were established to care for children, teaching them languages, cultural practices, and religious teachings. As diaspora communities grew, so did their political awareness regarding access to education. The Girmitiya community, a significant part of the Indian diaspora, takes credit for its unique historical experiences and cultural preservation efforts. They were indentured labourers transported from India to plantation colonies between 1836 and 1920, creating a distinctive identity. The community has maintained strong cultural ties to their Indian roots, with events such as Geet Gawai highlighting their shared heritage. Community initiatives focus on raising awareness and promoting cultural preservation. The term Girmitiya, derived from the English word "gimit," refers to the system of forced labour established during the British colonial period. The term "girmitiya" symbolizes their resilience, cultural heritage, and shared history of struggle. Today, the community celebrates their history through cultural events and initiatives. (Bishoyi & Vivekananda International Foundation, 2024, Takkar, 202). In the 1900s, immigration passes for men, women, and infant boys have revealed certain patterns from which assumptions can be drawn (Pedro Perez, 2018).

The migration patterns of Girmitiyas, or Indian indentured labourers, primarily occurred during the 19th and early 20th centuries, as the British Empire sought to address labour shortages on plantations across various colonies. These labourers were predominantly sent to regions such as Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa, and the Caribbean, particularly Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, and Jamaica. The British colonial authorities recruited Girmitiyas to work on sugarcane plantations, where they faced challenging conditions while contributing significantly to the agricultural economies of these colonies. This migration was driven by a combination of socio-economic factors in India and the demand for labour in colonial plantations. The experiences of Girmitiyas were marked by a complex interplay of cultural preservation and adaptation, as they navigated their identities amidst the harsh realities of indenture. Their stories reflect themes of resilience and cultural continuity, which are captured in their folklores and literature, illustrating the socio-cultural consequences of their migration and the enduring legacy they have left behind in both their host countries and India.

The Girmitiya community, made up of indentured labourers from the Indian diaspora, has significantly influenced global cultural, economic, and social dynamics. While contributing to their host countries, they maintain strong ties to their Indian heritage. Their cultural identity is fluid, adapting to new environments while promoting Indian culture through festivals and traditions. This strengthens their diasporic identity (India Foundation, 2021). The community engages in philanthropy and development activities that benefit both India and host countries. The concept of superdiversity reflects their complex identities. Music plays a crucial role in fostering community cohesion and cultural expression. Additionally, the community's migration history shapes its sociopolitical engagement abroad while reinforcing ties with its ancestral homeland.

The impact of colonial policies on Girmitiya communities was profound and multifaceted, fundamentally altering their lives and cultural identities. Initially lured by deceptive promises of better wages, land, and freedom after a fixed term of labour, Girmitiyas quickly found themselves subjected to harsh realities upon arrival in foreign colonies. Colonial authorities implemented

exploitative labour practices that forced these indentured labourers to work long hours under brutal conditions, often with little to no pay. The contracts they signed were frequently manipulated, leading to extended periods of servitude that far exceeded the promised duration. Furthermore, the Girmitiyas faced severe restrictions on their movements and rights, effectively rendering them as commodities rather than individuals. This exploitation perpetuated a cycle of debt and dependency, as many were compelled to purchase goods from their employers at inflated prices, trapping them in a state of perpetual bondage. Despite these adversities, the Girmitiyas managed to forge unique cultural identities and contributed significantly to the societies they inhabited, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to influence cultural dynamics in regions like Fiji and Mauritius today. Ultimately, the colonial policies not only shaped the immediate experiences of Girmitiya communities but also had enduring effects on their descendants and the broader socio-cultural landscape of the diaspora.

### **Cultural Contributions of Girmitiyas**

Girmitiyas, or Indian indentured labourers, have significantly shaped the identity of diaspora communities worldwide. Upon arriving in British colonies, they brought Indian traditions – languages, customs, dress, and jewelry – that preserved their heritage and integrated Indian culture locally. Traditional attire like sarees and dhotis merged with local fashions, while festivals such as Diwali and Holi were celebrated alongside indigenous events. Retaining languages like Hindi, Bhojpuri, and Tamil fostered belonging among descendants. Girmitiyas also influenced cultural landscapes by blending Indian culinary practices with local ingredients to create unique traditions. Jewelry styles evolved to incorporate local designs while maintaining traditional motifs. This cultural exchange enriched the diaspora's heritage and positioned these communities as ambassadors for India, enhancing its soft power globally – especially in regions like West Bengal with historical ties. Their legacy exemplifies resilience in maintaining cultural identity despite adversity. Calcutta Port was vital to the Indian indenture system, serving as a major departure point for indentured labourers, or “coolies,” sent to British colonies from 1834 to 1920. Over half a million Indian workers left from Calcutta, connecting India with plantation economies in Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, and British Guiana. Calcutta Port was renamed Kolkata Port in 2001 to align with the city's name change. On January 12, 2020, it was renamed Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to mark its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary and honour a prominent Indian leader. The Kolkata Port Trust facilitated recruiting and transporting these labourers and housed them in depots like Bhowanipore before their departure. The Kolkata Memorial honours their resilience and struggles. The port's role helped form diaspora communities that maintained cultural ties to India while adapting to new environments, influencing identities among Indo-Caribbean, Indo-Mauritian, and Indo-Fijian populations. Calcutta Port's impact on migration is significant in both Indian history and the global narrative of labour and migration. Here are photos of coolies and girmitiya immigration passes. The influence of Girmitiyas on local cultures is profound, affecting festivals, cuisine, and art. As indentured labourers in British colonies, they brought rich cultural traditions that blended with local customs. Festivals like Diwali and Holi are celebrated vibrantly in Fiji and Mauritius, showcasing Indian culture's resilience. Their cuisine has enriched local diets with dishes like roti and curry, reflecting a fusion of Indian Flavors. In art, they adapted music and dance forms to their new environments. The first source highlights Girmitiyas' contributions as indentured labourers in countries like Mauritius and Fiji while maintaining their Indian traditions. This cultural integration enhances India's soft power globally.

The second source discusses the cultural identity challenges faced by Girmitiyas due to colonialism while highlighting their resilience and adaptability in preserving their heritage. This adaptability fosters connections with their ancestral homeland, enhancing India's cultural diplomacy. Evidence shows that Girmitiya communities preserve identities and contribute to global appreciation of Indian culture, boosting India's soft power and diplomatic relations with countries hosting significant Indian diasporas. In Fiji and Mauritius, Girmitiya communities have integrated Indian culture, creating vibrant Indo-Fijian communities with festivals like Diwali and Holi. The fusion of cuisine, music, and dance showcases preserved traditions. In Mauritius, they blend Indian customs with local practices through festivals such as Thaipoosam and Cavadee, enriching the culinary scene with adapted Indian dishes that strengthen ties to India. In South Africa, the Girmitiya legacy has fostered a strong Indian community actively engaged in socio-political life. Their cultural contributions – music, dance, cuisine – are integral to South African identity; national events like Diwali underscore this importance. Furthermore, the historical presence of girmitiyas in Bangladesh has facilitated cultural exchanges that enrich local customs while maintaining links to India across other South Asian nations.

These case studies illustrate how girmitiyas preserved their cultural identities while enriching their new societies, demonstrating the resilience of Indian culture. The British weren't the first at the Hooghly River; the end of indentureship concluded three major societal changes: the Dutch abolished Amerindian slavery in 1793, the Abolition Act of 1834 freed Africans, and ending indentureship liberated bonded Indians. By 1900, girmitiyas (Indian indentured labourers) were easily identifiable by their distinctive dress. Men typically wore dhotis and kurtas, while women wore saris and traditional jewellery. This attire reflected their cultural heritage even in unfamiliar places like Fiji, Trinidad, and Mauritius, serving as a personal identifier and symbolizing their roots amid the challenges of indentured labour.

Despite oppressive conditions, girmitiyas maintained their traditional dress, distinguishing themselves from other labour groups and local populations. This adherence was vital for preserving their identity and cultural practices, even as colonial authorities derogatorily labelled them “coolies.” Their clothing reflected a blend of local influences, including African and Chinese styles. However, Western influence led to a decline in traditional garments among younger generations. Practical modifications adapted to harsh working conditions while societal changes pressured individuals to conform to modern fashion trends. This created a balance between maintaining cultural identity and adapting to contemporary styles. Girmitiya wore red robes during their

servitude in the 1830s, symbolizing resilience and strength for Indian communities worldwide. The robe not only reflects their heritage but also embodies the festive spirit as they adjusted to life in the colonies.

### **Girmitiyas and India's Soft Power**

Girmitiya communities significantly enhance India's global image by serving as cultural ambassadors and promoting Indian traditions, values and practices in their host countries. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted during the 18th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, the Indian diaspora, including the descendants of the Girmitiya, plays a crucial role in shaping the global perception of India. These communities actively engage in cultural exchanges that showcase Indian festivals, cuisine and art forms, fostering a deeper understanding of India's rich cultural heritage. Their contribution to local economies through entrepreneurship and remittances further cements India's economic ties with these nations. Additionally, the political influence of Indian-origin leaders in various countries strengthens diplomatic relations and enhances India's strategic interests globally. By integrating their cultural practices into the social fabric of their host societies, Girmitiya communities not only preserve their heritage but also contribute to a positive image of India as a nation that values cultural diversity and richness. This multifaceted engagement highlights the importance of Girmitiyas in promoting India's soft power on the international stage.

The Indian diaspora plays a vital role in promoting Indian culture abroad through vibrant festivals and cultural exchanges, serving as a bridge between India and the global community. With over 35 million people spread across 125 countries, the diaspora actively preserves and celebrates Indian traditions, languages and customs, especially during major festivals such as Diwali, Holi and Eid. These celebrations not only foster a sense of community among Indians abroad but also invite local people to participate, thereby enhancing cross-cultural understanding. Cultural exchanges facilitated by diaspora organizations often include art exhibitions, dance performances and food festivals that showcase the diversity of Indian heritage. Events like Pravasi Bharatiya Divas highlight the contribution of the diaspora in shaping a 'Viksit Bharat' (developed India), thus reinforcing India's commitment to engaging its global citizens. Through these initiatives, the diaspora not only maintains cultural links with their homeland but also enriches the cultural heritage of their host countries, thereby amplifying India's soft power on the international stage.

India is focusing on strengthening ties with the Girmitiya people, recognizing their historical importance. The Girmitiya Conference 2021, organized by the Ministry of External Affairs, brought together representatives from 18 countries to discuss the contributions and challenges faced by these communities. The conference highlighted India's recognition of the cultural and historical ties that connect these communities to their Indian roots, encouraging dialogue on identity formation and cultural preservation. Initiatives such as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas highlight the importance of the Indian diaspora as ambassadors of Indian culture to the world. The Get to Know India Programmes prioritizes youth from Girmitiya countries, facilitating visits to India to engage with its cultural heritage. Scholarships for children of people of Indian origin aim to enhance educational opportunities and strengthen ties with India.

### **West Bengal as a Cultural Hub**

West Bengal has a rich cultural history, especially concerning the Girmitiya communities. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many Girmitiyas migrated to British colonies, leading to significant cultural exchange. Their traditions and practices have become integral to West Bengal's diverse landscape, evident in festivals like Durga Puja and Diwali that showcase their syncretism. The vibrant art scene reflects their influence on regional identity. Additionally, West Bengal fosters cultural diplomacy with the Indian diaspora and neighbouring countries like Bangladesh. Events such as the Kolkata International Film Festival promote Bengali art, music, and cuisine to local and international audiences. The government engages in diplomatic dialogue with the Bengali diaspora in Bangladesh to strengthen shared identities and enhance bilateral relations, positioning West Bengal as a cultural bridge between India and its neighbours. West Bengal's strategic involvement in India's soft power initiatives is a result of its historical legacy with the Indian diaspora, particularly in the Caribbean and South East Asia. This has led to a rich exchange of cultural practices and the promotion of traditional festivals such as Durga Puja has gained international recognition. This approach strengthens India's soft power by fostering goodwill and collaboration. It also contributes to India's regional policy objectives of strengthening its legacy with the diaspora and promoting cultural diplomacy globally. Cultural Programmes aimed at introducing Girmitiya to local communities have played a vital role in preserving local heritage and promoting community identity. The 'Girmit Commemoration and Celebration' in Fiji is an example of such an initiative, celebrating the long tradition of Girmitiya culture and facilitating intergenerational dialogue. These Programmes are essential platforms to foster unity among Girmitiya students and strengthen their ties with India's rich cultural heritage. West Bengal's involvement in India's soft power initiatives stems from its historical ties with the Indian diaspora, especially in the Caribbean and Southeast Asia. This has facilitated cultural exchanges and promoted traditional festivals like Durga Puja, enhancing India's soft power through goodwill and collaboration. Programs introducing Girmitiya culture to local communities are crucial for preserving heritage and fostering identity. For instance, the 'Girmit Commemoration and Celebration' in Fiji celebrates Girmitiya culture and encourages intergenerational dialogue, strengthening ties with India's cultural heritage. However, Girmitiya communities face challenges regarding identity and recognition, feeling marginalized both abroad and in India. Despite their historical contributions, they struggle for belonging amid dominant narratives that overlook their unique history. Socioeconomic issues further complicate matters of recognition. To foster a more inclusive national identity, India must actively engage Girmitiya descendants and acknowledge all aspects of its diaspora.

Indian forced labourers, known as girmitiya, faced socio-political challenges in their host countries that hindered their integration and quality of life. They encountered systemic discrimination, xenophobia, and limited land ownership and political representation. Economic instability exacerbated job competition, creating tensions with local populations. The legacy of colonialism further complicated their status as outsiders. Access to healthcare and education was often restricted by bureaucratic barriers and lack of rights recognition. These issues underscored the ongoing struggle for equality in societies marked by historical injustices. Globalization significantly impacts Girmitiya descendants' traditional practices and community cohesion, presenting both challenges and opportunities. It can erode customs like festivals as younger generations adopt modern lifestyles, weakening community bonds. Conversely, globalization also offers avenues for revitalization through digital platforms and cultural festivals that help reconnect them with their heritage, fostering a renewed sense of identity while adapting to modern realities.

### **Recommendations for Strengthening Ties**

Girmitiya communities aim to strengthen cultural ties through strategic recommendations such as expanding Programmes like Know India Programmes, National Pension Programmes for NRIs, Online Voting Services, Overseas Citizenship Programmes, Prasi Teerth Darshan Yojana, Know Goa Programmes, Scholarship Programmes for Diaspora Children, and more. Community Welfare Fund of India, Prasi Bhartiya Kendra, Bharat ko Jaaniye Online Competition, Student Registration Portal, Prasi Bharatiya Divas, and IDF-OI's Prashisthit Pravasi Conferences are also being considered. Cultural exchange initiatives, diaspora tourism, increased scholarships for Girmitiya descendants to study in India, and virtual cultural workshops and debates are also being considered. These strategies aim to create a strong framework for collaboration, honour Girmitiya's legacy, and promote cultural diplomacy.

To strengthen India's soft power, the government can implement policy initiatives that recognize and celebrate the contributions of the Girmitiya. These include establishing cultural exchange Programmes, creating a cultural festival fund, integrating Girmitiya history into educational Programmes, and engaging Girmitiya descendants in cultural diplomacy. These initiatives can raise awareness, strengthen community bonds, and foster a sense of pride and identity among the younger generation. By recognizing the historical and contemporary contributions of the Girmitiya, these policies can strengthen India's soft power and deepen its understanding of its diverse cultural landscape.

India and its diaspora are fostering a two-way relationship for mutual growth and development. The diaspora is a vital bridge that facilitates the exchange of technology, investment and culture between host countries and India. They contribute to the Indian economy through large remittances, investments in various sectors and by strengthening economic ties. People of Indian origin occupy key positions in their societies, which has a positive impact on diplomatic relations and trade agreements. This two-way relationship strengthens India's global standing and enables diaspora communities to maintain a connection with their roots, fostering a sense of identity and belonging. Prioritizing engagement initiatives such as the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) Programmes and cultural Programmes can create a dynamic partnership that strengthens India's soft power on the international stage.

### **Conclusion**

Girmitiyas, a group of Indians, have a significant impact on India's soft power and cultural diplomacy. They have preserved their cultural identity by integrating into local cultures, enriching societies in countries such as Fiji, Mauritius and South Africa. Their cultural activities include celebrating Indian festivals, adapting Indian cuisine and contributing to art and music. They also promote India's cultural influence abroad. However, its historical neglect in India's national discourse highlights the need for a more inclusive approach. Fostering a mutually beneficial relationship between India and its diaspora is critical to maximising the potential of girmitiyas in strengthening India's soft power and promoting cultural diplomacy in an interconnected world. The cultural practices and identities of the Girmitiya communities significantly strengthen India's soft power and facilitate stronger cultural diplomacy between India and nations with significant Indian diaspora populations. Its unique cultural practices, including festivals, cuisine, and art forms, have enriched the cultural fabric of countries like Fiji and Mauritius, strengthening India's cultural presence in the world. Recognizing and integrating these contributions into the contemporary Indian identity is essential to fostering a more inclusive national narrative that recognizes the diverse experiences of its people. Recognizing the historical struggles of the Girmitiya not only validates their historical struggles but also strengthens India's soft power by showcasing its rich cultural diversity. Recognizing their legacy can inspire future generations to appreciate the complexities of migration and identity, promoting unity and pride among all Indians. Ultimately, integrating the contributions of the Girmitiya into the contemporary Indian identity is a critical step towards building a more inclusive society that values their multifaceted heritage. The Girmitiyas, Indian slave labourers, have significantly shaped the cultural landscape of countries like Fiji and Mauritius. Their unique practices, including festivals, cuisine, and art forms, have enriched the cultural fabric of these countries and strengthened India's presence in the world. Recognizing their contributions is critical to a more inclusive national narrative and to strengthening India's soft power. This integration validates their historical struggles and showcases India's rich cultural diversity. It also inspires future generations to appreciate the complexities of migration and identity, promoting unity and pride among Indians. Therefore, integrating the contributions of the Girmitiyas into the contemporary Indian identity is a critical step towards building a more inclusive society that values their multifaceted heritage.

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