



## LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF HINDU DIASPORA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The research article aims to reflect the language and the cultural identity of the Hindu Diaspora. Language forms a significant part of the cultural identity. The word “diaspora” is generally not used for religions but the case of Hinduism is unique. The population of Hindus living outside the Indian subcontinent has never formed a large fraction of the total Hindu population. Even today more than 95% of Hindus live in the Indian subcontinent. The percentage of converted Hindus is much smaller as compared to the other major religions of the world. Hindus are a heterogeneous community which has expanded all over the world and speaks several languages. The Hindu Diaspora is a kind of an ecotone, which is between the traditional Hindu culture and the culture of its resident country. It consists of people of Indian origin and non resident Indians. The research paper classifies the Hindu diaspora into various spoken languages and culture further it also tries to present its spatial dimension. There have been various stages of emigration of the Hindus from the subcontinent. The research article presents the migration of Hindu Diaspora in terms of its spatial and temporal dimension. The research article also demonstrates two small case studies regarding the Hindu Diaspora in Reunion Island and the Hindu Diaspora of South American countries of Guyana and Suriname. The research article also presents the impact of Indian languages and culture in the various pockets of the world. The author has compared the dominance of Indian languages vis-a-vis each other over the Hindu Diaspora. In the light of the massive data required, the author uses secondary data. The reports of various International institutions, governments, newspaper articles and journals have been used as a source of the data. The various Hindu customs, foods and festivals are celebrated with full vigour in the continent, which were unheard of a few decades ago. The author finds that the Hindu Diaspora is evolving socially, economically and culturally. It is now an integral part of many nations and it has the potential to function as a bridge between their resident country and India.*



**KEYWORDS:** Language, Migration, South-east Asia, Caribbean, Plantation crops, Brain drain.

## INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world. It is a heterogeneous religion with many schools of thought. Some of the 'schools of thought' are even contradictory in nature. The religion originated in the Indian subcontinent and further it has no ecclesiastical order. The word "Hindu" is derived from Sindhu (old name of river Indus). Some people and scholars called it as "Sanathan Dharm". Hinduism is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest religion in the world and it is 4<sup>th</sup> largest group if atheists as a group are included. Today over 15% of the world's population practices Hinduism<sup>1</sup>. Hindus can choose any form of worship like polytheistic, monotheistic, monistic, agnostic, humanist or atheist. The East African and south-east Asian countries were probably the earliest destinations for them. In the post Gupta era, the Hindus believed that crossing the sea meant losing their caste. As a result not many Indians emigrated to other nations till the beginning of modern era. The English needed skilled and semi-skilled labour in the other colonies hence many Indians immigrated to these new destinations of Caribbean and Southern Africa. The post-Independence and globalised era has created job and entrepreneurship opportunities for Indians in the western and the Arab world.

## ANCIENT HINDU EMIGRATION

The Indian subcontinent being at the apex of Indian Ocean was the pivotal point for trade routes. Indian traders not only established trade relations with South-east Asia, East Africa, East Asia and Island of Indian Ocean. Some of the traders settled in these parts of the world. The evidence of small Hindu settlements has been found in Zanzibar, Madagascar and south-eastern coast of Africa<sup>2</sup>.

## HINDU DIASPORA OF SOUTH-EAST ASIAN NATIONS

The Indian subcontinent and south-east Asian countries had trade relations from the last 2 millennia. The trade between the Indian subcontinent to South-east Asia had created a new social fabric between these regions, which later lead to the emigration of Hindus from Indian subcontinent



to this region. This emigration also brought Brahmins and Buddhist monks who had a considerable influence on the local rulers. Many of the rulers even took up Hinduism as their religion. Hindu elements from Indian culture brought by the emigrants from India introduced new words in the South-east Asian languages. The Hindu diaspora has learnt the native languages of these region. Enormous temples to Shiva and Vishnu were built in the ancient Khmer empire, attesting to the power and prestige of Hindu traditions in the region. Angkor Wat which was built in the 12th century in Cambodia, was originally consecrated to Vishnu, although it was soon converted to (and is still in use as) a Buddhist temple. There has been emigration of Tamils in the medieval era to these countries and still today majority of them speak Tamil as their mother tongue. The Hindu diaspora today speaks Malaysian, Indonesian, and English apart from their mother tongues like Tamil, Hindi, Telgu and Malayalam. The Bali Hindus need a special mention as they have preserved their culture even after mass conversion after the advent of Islam in the whole south-east region of Asia. The altered caste system of India can be seen in Bali. They celebrate festivals like Galungan<sup>3</sup>, which is similar to Diwali.

## HINDU DIASPORA OF BHUTAN

Lhotshampas are a heterogeneous community of Nepalese descent in Bhutan. They speak Nepali as their mother tongue and other Bhutanese languages like Dkongkha. Since 1980's they have been expelled out of Bhutan by labeling them as illegal migrants. Most of the Lhotshampas have now resettled to first world countries of America and Europe. These resettled immigrants speak Nepali and English.

## HINDU DIASPORA OF BURMA

Hindus have lived in Burma for many centuries but most of the ancestors of the current Burmese Hindu community immigrated to Burma from the start of British rule in the mid-19th century to the separation of British Burma from British India in 1937. It is estimated that the Hindu population is over 8 lakh and forms around 1.5% of the total population. Burmese literature has also been enriched by Hinduism, including the Burmese adaptation of the Ramayana, called Yama



Zatdaw. Many Hindu gods are likewise worshipped by many Burmese people, such as Saraswati (known as Thuyathadi in Burmese); Shiva is called Paramizwa and Vishnu is called Withano.

## EMIGRATED HINDUS FROM MID18<sup>TH</sup> TO MID20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Indian indenture system was a system of indenture (i.e. a form of debt bondage) by which 3.5 million Indians were transported to various European colonies to provide labour mainly for the plantations crops. It had started after the end of slavery (i.e.1833) and continued upto 1920's. This has resulted in the development of large Hindu diaspora in Southern Africa, Central America and islands like Fiji, Reunion and Mauritius. This has also led to the growth of Indo-Caribbean and Indo-African population. Indians started arriving in Fiji from 1879. Hindus form a considerable part of the total population in Fiji. They speak Hindi as their mother tongue but English and Fijian languages elsewhere. It is interesting to note that even after the English had its colonies on more than one-third area of Africa and with a spatial extent from Egypt to South Africa, the Hindu population is found only in Southern and Eastern Africa. This is because Indians were not transported to Northern or North-eastern Africa as these areas didn't have plantation crops in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, nor there was massive construction of railways which needed skilled labor.

Hindus came to Africa mostly by the system of indenture. The plantation crops provided large number of job opportunities in the southern Africa. The majority of current Hindus in African provinces are descendants of indentured laborer brought in by the colonial governments from India between the years of 1860 to 1919. They were also used as laborer in mining operations owned by European settlers. In Tanzania, the Hindus speak Hindi, Gujarati and English. Skilled and semi-skilled Indian labor was brought in Eastern Africa for constructing railway lines between Uganda to Kenya. Majority of these Indians were Hindus and they had greater religious freedom as compared to Indian laborer of Southern Africa. A minority fraction of them got settled in Eastern Africa. They mostly speak Hindi, English and Swahili. Nearly all the Hindu festivals like Diwali, Holi, Ugadi, Thaipusam and Maha- Shivratri are celebrated in Africa with full vigor. Post-independence of these African countries Indians as a group was targeted in most of the countries. Therefore, some of them



migrated to Europe and India. In the recent decades, the Sindhi and Gujarati traders have settled in various pockets of Africa.

## CASE STUDY OF REUNION ISLAND

The sugarcane plantations were 1<sup>st</sup> introduced in 19<sup>th</sup> century here and Indians were immigrated to this island as laborer<sup>4</sup>. Later many Hindus were forced to convert into Christianity. The unique feature about these converted people is that many of them got themselves reconverted into Hindus in the next century therefore today they practice both the religions. These people are Christians socially but Hindus privately<sup>4</sup>. Hence there is a great discrepancy in the census data of this island.

## HINDUS OF MAURITIUS

It is the only country outside Indian subcontinent where nearly half of its population practices Hinduism<sup>6</sup>. The forefathers of this community were brought as plantation laborer from India. They were from mostly from the states of UP, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. Today this community speaks many languages like Creole, Hindi, Bhojpuri, French and English. This community has not practiced caste system and promotes inter-caste marriages. These efforts of social stratification by the community are appreciable. All Hindu homes have a temple at their entrance. The major Hindu festivals celebrated in Mauritius are Maha-Shivratri, Diwali, Holi, Ugadi, Thaipusam, Ganesh Chaturthi and Makar Sankranti.

## CASE STUDY OF GUYANA AND SURINAME

Guyana and Suriname are neighboring countries in northern part of South America. Guyana was colonized by the British while Suriname was colonized by the Dutch. The obvious result of this was that Guyanese learned to speak English, while Surinamese learned Dutch. The colonial policy of each country was also very different regarding religion. The Dutch did not interfere in the culture of the Hindus while the English did interfere in Guyana by bringing missionaries to Guyana to



evangelize the Indian population<sup>5</sup>. That is why Hindi has persisted in Suriname but not in Guyana. Hindus today comprise about 30% of the Guyanese population while it constitutes around 26% of Surinamese population.

## EMIGRANT HINDU DIASPORA DUE TO GLOBALISATION

Due to globalization, the gates of many labor scare nations opened for India. Post-independence there has been emigration from India to the 1<sup>st</sup> world countries and to the middle-east for job opportunities. Prior to 1965, Hindu immigration to the United States was minuscule and isolated, as in 1965 the Immigration and Nationality Services (INS) Act was passed which opened the doors to Hindu immigrants, who wished to work and even start families in the United States. This immigration also included Hindu preachers, who propagated the Hindu religion among the people, who previously had little or no contact with Hinduism. Most American Hindus are immigrants from not only from Indian subcontinent but also from Myanmar, Indonesia, the Caribbean (Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname and Jamaica), Fiji, South Africa, and Mauritius and other countries and their descendants. Many discriminated Hindus of Bhutan and Sri Lanka have also settled in USA and Canada. Today there are about 16 lakh Hindus in USA and 5 lakh Hindus in Canada. The major languages of the Hindu community in Canada are Punjabi, Gujarati and English.

## HINDU DIASPORA OF UK

As United Kingdom ruled India for nearly 3 centuries, Indians absorbed their language and culture. Hence United Kingdom became a hot destination for Indian emigrants. There are over 8 lakh Hindus in United Kingdom today forming nearly 1.5% of the total population of UK<sup>7</sup>. UK had subsequent waves of immigration after the independence of India, followed by expulsion of Hindus from African countries and then finally the brain drain from India. Hence the Hindu diaspora is a heterogeneous community. The other languages of this community besides English are Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Urdu, Gujarati and Tamil.





## HINDU DIASPORA OF AUSTRALASIA

The Hindu community is growing at a fast rate in Australia and New Zealand. It is estimated that it forms over 1.2% and 2.1%<sup>8</sup> of the total population respectively. The Hindus in Australia are from India, Fiji, Malaysia, Singapore and Nepal. The major languages of Hindus in Australia are English and Hindi<sup>9</sup>. There has been huge jump in the Hindu population mainly due to the liberal immigration laws of the past few decades.

## HINDU DIASPORA OF OTHER DEVELOPED NATIONS

The Hindu Diaspora is growing in the developed countries of Italy, France, and Switzerland. This increase of Hinduism is majorly due to emigration of Indians for employment opportunities. The liberal immigration and work visa allows foreigners to live and work in these labor deficient countries.

## NONRESIDENT HINDUS OF MIDDLE-EAST

There are about 2.2 million Hindus in Arabian states but nearly all of them are Nonresident Indians. Most of the Hindus came here for work in oil and gas sector in the previous decades. The governments are not willing to provide citizenship to the foreigners. This community is an important source of remittance for India.

## CONCLUSION:

The Hindu Diaspora has evolved differently in different pockets of the world mainly due to their unique and difficult circumstances. In the present era of globalization and liberalization, migration is a need for both the origin and destination countries. Many 1<sup>st</sup> world countries and countries of Middle-east have shortage of labor and India being the rich source of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labor has been a provider, for the last few decades. The past decades though have caused a brain drain from India but it also received the largest remittances<sup>10</sup> in the world.



Hindus have emigrated to various pockets of the world. Due to the policy of discrimination against non-natives in most of the African countries, the Hindus have faced serious hardships in these nations. Many of them have migrated to the developed countries. The recent trend of Hindu migration is towards the developed nations. They have been liberal enough to absorb the local culture as this helped them to flourish as successful entrepreneurs and job seekers. The growing population, literacy rate and absolute unemployment in India shall pull the skilled and semi-skilled Hindu population to both developed and developing countries for better employment opportunities. The Pravasi bhartiya Diwas has provided a platform for the Hindu Diaspora to meet its roots while for India it provides opportunities to capitalize the investment and to improve trade and cultural relations with other nations.

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