From Bihar to Mauritius: Women as Carriers of Memory and Identity in the Girmitiya Diaspora

Dr. Suprita Jha
Professor, Mata Sundri College, University of Delhi, India

Abstract:

The migration of Indians from Bihar to Mauritius under the indentured labour system, remembered as Girmitiya, involved not only the movement of people but also of memories, traditions, languages, beliefs and cultural practices. This paper examines the significant yet often overlooked role of Girmitiya women from Bihar in preserving and transmitting cultural identity in Mauritius. Despite the hardships of indenture and displacement, women sustained connections with their homeland through family traditions, religious rituals, folk songs, food, language and oral narratives. Cultural preservation often occurred naturally within domestic and community spaces. Through lullabies, wedding songs, stories, Bhojpuri expressions, and festivals such as Chhath, women transmitted cultural memory to younger generations and maintained links with their ancestral heritage. These traditions also strengthened collective identity within the emerging Indo-Mauritian community. However, Girmitiya women were not simply passive preservers of an unchanged past. They adapted inherited customs to the social and cultural realities of Mauritius, creating a dynamic diasporic identity. Their experiences demonstrate that cultural memory survives not only through preservation but also through adaptation. By positioning Girmitiya women as cultural mediators, this study highlights their resilience and crucial contribution to sustaining Indo-Mauritian cultural consciousness across generations.