

**Speech of High Commissioner of India to Guyana, HE Dr. K.J. Srinivasa, on 4 May 2022
at the University of Guyana Symposium marking 184 Years of East Indian Arrival in Guyana**

Namaste. Greetings from the High Commission and the people of India - the Motherland.

Honourable Vice Chancellor of University of Guyana Dr Paloma Mohamed Martin, Dean Roslin Khan, distinguished academics - Prof. Baytoram Ramharack, Dr Seeta Shah Roath, Prof Somdat Mahabir, Mr Cliff Rajkumar, Mr Alim Hosein, Mr Andrew Kendall and others, members of the Indian Diaspora / socio-religious-cultural organizations, Distinguished Guests, dear sisters and brothers of Guyana, friends from the Media.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today on this important occasion to commemorate Indian Arrival Day 2022 by the University of Guyana on the role of contributions from Indo-Guyanese to culture in Guyana and the importance of continued culture-sharing between India and Guyana. I remember joining them last year also.

Let me begin by wishing all Guyanese and friends of Guyana on the occasion of the 184th Indian Arrival Day on behalf of the Government and people of India.

The histories of all nations contain certain significant junctures which point to a reshaping and a transformation of society. For Guyana, one of those junctures was the arrival of the the Ship Whitby and then Hesperus into then British Guiana 184 years ago from the port of Calcutta which between them landed a total of 423 persons including 382 indentured males, 14 indentured females, 21 children and 6 Christian Anglo-Indian interpreter/ superintendents. Thus 5th May is a very important day in the history of Guyana and is celebrated as Arrival Day because the arrival in Guyana from India substantially changed the course of Guyana's history considering the contributions made by Indentured Labour in the nation building of Guyana. We do so in acknowledgment of their struggle to survive in harsh surroundings and to build a better society for all. It is also an important day for the Indo-Guyana bilateral relations as the cultural linkages brought in by the East Indians still act as a bridge between Guyana and India.

During the period from 1838 to 1917, till the abolition of Indentured Labourship, about 239,000 Indian immigrants arrived in Guyana in over 500 ships and out of these and out of these, about 75,000 returned to India on completion of their contracts. The remainder who survived chose to make Guyana their home and they are known in the Caribbean as East Indians. They derived mostly from the Bhojpuri-speaking belt of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and after 1870's from Madras with a sprinkling from other states, in particular Punjab. Persons who left India crossed the "Black Waters - Kaala Pani" which in itself a great taboo to overcome in Indian traditions. The majority of immigrants came from the lower agricultural castes; artisan castes; cultivator castes (kurmi); grazier castes (ahir); landholding castes (thakur), and priestly castes (brahmin). There were also significant numbers of muslims and outcasts.

In the case of the indentured laborers from India, historians tell us that for varying reasons, these men and women left the familiarity of their homes in the pursuit of the promise of a better future. Their arrival brought in new traditions, a new language and new ways of thinking. The preservation of these customs enabled those pioneers to cope with the arduous journey across the seas and the daily rigors associated with the harsh realities of life on the estates.

The indentured labourers or girmityas who came to Guyana have indeed left an indelible imprint on the cultural (language, cuisine, music, clothing, dance, arts, etc) landscape, and on the economic, social, religious, and political fabric of the nation. Their immense contributions and accomplishments in every field of endeavour have been on the basis of great personal sacrifice (of disconnection with their ancestral homeland) to better Guyana. Their presence has added to the richness and uniqueness of the Guyanese nation: multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and cuisine. Their values have persisted till this day.

Thus, it is appropriate for the nation to recognise the contributions made by the pioneering Indians and the values and material things that they brought from India. With their food, natural talents and sheer genius, our East Indian fore parents have made invaluable contributions towards the economic and cultural development of Guyana.

The Indian diaspora in Guyana has and is playing crucial role in the economic, political and social development of the country. The indentured Indians after the completion of their contracts, took to their occupations and displayed the diversity of their natural and acquired talents. Gradually, Indians began to move into market gardening, milk production, rice and other agricultural production thus ensuring the Food Security of the country. Some moved into commerce selling mainly groceries and haberdashery and later consumer durables like cars and agricultural machines and since they had to be very competitive to survive, the consumers benefited. the occupations of 'free' Indians displayed the diversity of their natural and acquired talents. They excelled in the areas of rice cultivation; cattle farming; manufacturers of coconut oil; bakers; chemists; shopkeepers, merchants; mechanics; clerks; barbers; boatmen; tailors; goldsmiths; doctors; lawyers; sportsmen; politicians; accountants; ambassadors; religious leaders; among many other prestigious portfolios. Acquiring Education was a challenge. Primary schools were never established in areas such as the sugar estates where Indians lived and parents who could afford it, sent their children to attend schools in the villages or in the City. By the end of the 1920's Indian lawyers and doctors began to strengthen the professional class and several Indian doctors became legends. The Civil Service and other state employers tended to keep to the policy of not employing Indians and also persuading big businesses to maintain that policy since it was feared that if Indians left Agriculture or the countryside, the British-owned sugar estates would suffer labour shortage. The Indian presence has immeasurably enriched the Guyanese nation.

It is very heartwarming to note that the Indo-Guyanese still retain their culture despite settling down in a far-off country for almost two centuries. The most beautiful aspect of the Indo-Guyanese culture in Guyana is their strength of resilience and adaptation. It is not an exaggeration to say that Indian culture has tremendous influence over the overall culture of Guyana be it music, food, language, art, costumes, etc. As we are all aware, Indian religious rituals, cuisine, customs and traditions have indeed enriched the country's cultural mosaic. Indian enterprise diversified the local economy. Indian descendants ventured successfully into politics and were active in social organizations and in sport. Indians have achieved prominence in all aspects of national life. They cultivated respectful relations with other races and, in so doing, fostered the development of a more cohesive nation. They are an integral part of the political system and, together with other ethnic groups, contributed to the evolution of Guyana's demography, economy and society.

One other aspect of Indian origin was the introduction of two religions - Hinduism and Islam which were strengthened and their places of worship were renewed and Indian culture began to contribute to mainstream national culture. Indo-Guyanese Hindus continue to observe most of Hindu holidays such as Diwali, Phagwah, Maha Shivratri, Hanuman Jayanti, Ram Navami, Navratri, Vijayadashami, Krishna Janmashtami, Radhastami, Saraswati Jayanti, Raksha Bandhan, Vivaha Panchami, Guru Purnima, Ganesh Chaturthi, Kartik Snan, Mesha Sankranti, Makar Sankranti, Tulsi Vivah, and Gita Jayanti among others, while Indo-Guyanese Muslims observe Ramadan, Eid ul-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Hosay, Mawlid, and the Islamic New Year. I was amazed to see these and to participate in most of them has been a distinct privilege for me. In fact the Karthik Purnima on the sea wall being celebrated every year by the Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha, brought back beautiful memories of the Ganga Aarti in Varanasi-the holy city.

All cultures are unique, rich and meaningful in their own ways. The same can be said for the Indo-Guyanese culture of Guyana. In many ways, the overall cultural stage of Guyana was significantly shaped by Indians. Their culture has many branches and roots; it is more than what the eye meets. Perhaps, the most beautiful aspect of the Indo-Guyanese culture in Guyana is the strength of its resilience and adaptation. The Indian culture we have in Guyana differs from that of its ancestors' in India. From the language they speak, all the way to how they cook the curried dishes, all of which are different but still yet significant.

That is evidence that culture can adapt and still be preserved at the same time. Their ancestors had to adapt to this tropical region, they had not the tools and ingredients to cook their traditional foods, they had not the garments to make their traditional wear and they also lost their mother tongue along the way and adapted to western languages. Nonetheless, what we know today as the 'Indo-Guyanese Culture' is undoubtedly significant and relevant to who and what are known as Guyanese. There was a struggle to maintain the Indian culture because of the personal struggles those before now faced on the plantation. However, they have preserved Indian culture creditably and successfully because across Guyana, religion and culture has been spread and practised.

The language is something that has suffered tremendously. Unlike Guyana's neighbours; Suriname and Trinidad/Tobago where Hindi or in fact Bhojpur is spoken, Hindi is not spoken as a main language in Guyana. These indentured workers who spoke Awadhi, Bhojpur etc. and were recruited by Arkathis who were paid based on the number of heads they recruited, who actually deceived the prospective recruits with stories of how easy it was to earn vast sums of money and that the distance between Guyana and India was a short one and one could return to India in a few days. The rosy pictures of the Arkathis were soon exploded when the indentures arrived in Guyana and the term 'arkathi' came to be used for a trickster and criminal and is still so used even today. One more example is the very word 'Girmit', from which Girmitya is derived to describe those who left India as indentured laborer represents an Indian pronunciation of the English language word "agreement".

Take the example of food where the Dhalpuri, Dhal, Curry, Roti or the types of chutneys, stews and vegetables along with Sweet Meats like mithai, Pakora, Gulab Jamun, Vermicelli, etc. are staple. Or of Jewelry which has been a significant adornment for Indian women since ages whose significance in an Indian woman's life can be judged from the number of jewelry gifts she receives on a variety of auspicious occasions. Indian women decorating themselves with jewelry is not only a customary tradition, but also has a lot of values attached to each and every piece. Some of the jewelry East Indians contributed includes finger rings, bracelets, bangles, brooches, anklets, nose rings and earrings that extend from the bottom of the ear lobe to the nose and heavily ornamented necklaces. Clothes like the Sari and the dhoti have been in Guyana for a long time though I don't see much of the Dhoti, while the Dupatta/ Shawl, shalwars, Kurtas, Jamas and lehengas are quite common. The Sehra is a must during Indian marriages.

Indian instrumental influence can be seen in Guyana through the use of the tabla, harmonium, dholak, dhantal, manjira, khartal, and tassa drums. Indian dances like Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, etc. along with the influence of Bollywood seen in most of the gatherings where young and old swing to Indian tunes is a sight to watch.

India is very proud of the achievements by the Indo-Guyanese Diaspora and their role in the development of Guyana. I feel immensely happy to mention that many luminaries from the Indian Diaspora in Guyana held highly esteemed positions in Guyana across all spheres, including political, economic, cultural, sports, etc. be it that of President, Prime Minister, Vice President, luminaries in each field above mentioned, etc. leading and guiding the nation from the front.

I consider it indeed a matter of great honor and privilege for me to have been appointed to serve as the Indian High Commissioner to this Girmitya land. The priority of the current Government of India led by my Hon'ble Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi is to build everlasting links with the Indian Diaspora the world over, especially with our Indian Diaspora in the Girmitya lands including Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago, Mauritius, Fiji and South Africa. In fact Indian Prime Minister Modi ji had been to Guyana around 1999-2000 and he fondly remembers the people and country of Guyana. The contribution of HSS - Hindus for Selfless Service has been very influential.

The Government of India through the High Commission in Guyana has been closely working with Government of Guyana in several fields and delivered on various infrastructure, healthcare, renewable energy, technical capacity building through ITEC/KIP/ICCR/GOAL as well as education projects.

As part of our cultural outreach programs, the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre provides ample opportunities for Guyanese to study Indian classical dances like Kathak, Indian classical music including Tabla, Sitar & Harmonium, Hindi & Sanskrit lessons, Yoga, etc. Our team of teachers hold classes across Guyana, though due to COVID our outreach was restricted, we expect to return to normal learning soon. The High Commission has been working on an initiative to distribute books on Indian culture, history and art to various educational and religious / socio cultural organizations across Guyana to enable the new generation to be further educated about India. We are also gifting Indian musical instruments to various Mandirs across Guyana. We are expecting more instruments soon along with a cache of Hindi study materials. The dedication of the Indian Diaspora to Indian culture with the regular sessions including Chowtaals, celebration of the unique Diwali parade, and the two centuries old religious songs inspire us all. Hats off to all those who have preserved the age old traditions. The Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha under the able leadership of Hon'ble Dr Vindhya Vasini Persaud has been one of the torch bearers of this, deserves special mention and I would like to commend them for their phenomenal work in this sector.

Availing this opportunity, I would also like to share with and reassure you that the High Commission and the Government of India would be happy to work closely with the Government of Guyana, other institutions like the University of Guyana and extend its hand of collaboration in more areas of benefit to the people of Guyana. It is our aim and endeavor to see that the expertise and capacities available with India is shared with our friendly country Guyana and help our sisters and brothers in Guyana to enable them to contribute more to the growth of the nation and for progress and prosper in their lives.

Dear friends, I hope that we continue to build upon this sacred relationship between our Motherland India and Guyana. The massive projected transformation of Guyana in the next decade will have India as a strategic partner and we wish to strengthen our partnership.

I sincerely hope that this day is used suitably to reflect and show appreciation to the contributions that the Indian ancestors in Guyana have made and find ways and means to preserve the existing and metamorphosised version of the Indian culture. "A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the souls of its people" said Mahatma Gandhi. Let then in Guyana, the Indian culture be reflective through the goodness and light of our hearts and souls.

Indian Arrival Day commemorates the introduction of a valuable and creative force into Guyanese life which was of the utmost importance in the creation and shaping of the Guyanese Nation. I once again wish all of you a very Happy and Safe Indian Arrival Day. God bless you all. Long live Guyana-India partnership.

Dr. K. J. Srinivasa

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