

## GIRMIT HERITAGE

# FIJI HINDI: IT'S A LEGITIMATE LANGUAGE FOR PEOPLE OF FIJI

AN INITIATIVE, BACKED BY UNESCO, HAS BEEN SUCCESSFULLY LAUNCHED IN AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND TO DRAW UP A WRITTEN SCRIPT FOR THE FIRST TIME

It is facilitated by linguist Farzana Gounder, a direct Girmite descendant, who lives and works in New Zealand. But it has been attacked by the supporters of the old Hindi.

FOCUS

## Analysis



Nemani Delaibatiki

The initiative to develop a formal written script for the Girmite languages or Fiji Hindi has attracted opposition from the advocates of the old Hindi.

The initiative was launched at a recent workshop, sponsored by UNESCO, in Auckland, New Zealand.

The positive outcome and the unprecedented interest the initiative generated has raised the hopes of Fiji Hindi supporters. But those who do not understand what the initiative is all about have started to verbally attack the workshop community participants online.

The critics claim that Fiji Hindi has corrupted the old Hindi that the Indentured Indian labourers brought with them when they arrived in Fiji to work in sugarcane plantations between 1879 and 1916.

Since then the Fiji Hindi was born and evolved over the years. It has become the conversational language and popular among the Indo-Fijian community. It is regarded as a principal tool of communication.

The only snag is that there is no written script. Linguists call it orthography – the conventional spelling system of a language.

Fiji Hindi is a spoken language that has yet no sanctioned orthography. When it has, then it can be taught in schools in Fiji with its distinct flavour as one of the main written languages.

### Its development

Fiji Hindi was first developed by the Girmities and represents a proud heritage. That is why this initiative is so important because it helps to preserve Girmite history that is inextricably linked to the building of Fiji as an independent nation.

The old Hindi, called Shudh Hindi, like Shakespearean English, is the idealised language, and represents the 'high' of the language continuum: one that is perceived as being 'pure' and 'perfect', serving a symbolic function.

If we are promoting the languages of Fiji, we should promote Fiji Hindi. This is the language we speak, and with which we resonate as a nation.

This is similar to how we teach modern English and not Shakespearean



Some of the participants at the workshop. Facilitator and linguist Farzana Gounder is fifth from left in the front row.

English. We can offer Shudh Hindi as an optional extra, but Fiji Hindi should be the language that is 'mandatory'.

Linguist Farzana Gounder, a direct Girmite descendant, who is in charge of this initiative, says: "We perceive all languages as living things and we do not want to 'kill off' any language variety or script. Our aim is to empower our community by increasing their linguistic resources. We respect the use of Fiji Hindi and Shudh Hindi/Urdu/Telegu/Tamil/Malyalam/Punjabi/Gujerati in our community. Every language has a place, and we encourage respect for all our community languages and speakers.

"All the other languages spoken in our community have a formal written script associated with them. Fiji Hindi, like other Girmite languages, does not yet have a formal script. To ensure that our Girmite languages, spoken around the world, get the recognition they deserve, we have developed a script.

"Fiji Hindi is a living link to our Girmite and Pacific history. For this reason, those of us who are passionate about Girmite are also passionate about Fiji Hindi.

"Our Girmite language is at the heart of our Girmite identity. Fiji Hindi arose in the Girmite canefields and Girmitya lines of Fiji and represents the beginnings of our Girmite community. The language was central to the community's survival during the hardships of Girmite, in which they laboured on a daily basis.

"Maintaining the language is a powerful testimony to our Girmitya forebears. Maintaining the language testifies that we respect the hard work and sacrifice of our Girmitya ancestors. Maintaining the language also testifies that we respect what our Girmitya forebears achieved for us,

which allows us to be where we are today, both individually and as a proud Pacific community."

### The Auckland workshop

The Auckland workshop was part of UNESCO supported community participation in the development of a Universal Roman Orthography for Indentured Hindustani Languages.

The Roman orthography was developed by the International Girmite Hindustani Language Committee.

The international committee, chaired by Ms Gounder, includes linguists, policy makers, creative artists, historians, and community members from Suriname, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, USA, and the Netherlands.

The aim of the UNESCO funded workshop was to trial the script within the Fiji Hindi speaking community, with youth and elders, who speak Fiji Hindi as their mother tongue.

The workshop was facilitated by Ms Gounder (IPU New Zealand), Jennifer Jannif (Ministry of Social Development) and Nikhat Shameem (University of the South Pacific), in partnership with community stakeholders Radio and Television Apna, Whanau Centre, and Fiji Girmite Foundation. The thirty participants included both youth and elders from the Fiji Indian community.

The facilitators stated that while the committee has designed a universal girmite orthography, it's important that it is being trialled for use with a specific language, as each of the indentured languages have their own sociolinguistic context, which is a significant consideration in language use.

The script also takes into account that all the Indentured Hindustani varieties have developed differently and therefore will have some unique dif-

ferences, in the same way that English differs between New Zealand and the United States of America.

Bipin Shankar, from the Ministry of Education, was at the workshop as an observer and called this "a historic moment for the Fiji Indian community".

The comments were endorsed by the two other observers, Amanda Aye from the Ministry of Education and Rachna Nath from the Human Rights Commission.

The workshop embraced the role of literacy in the heritage language as a source of resilience in everyday life.

The activities of the workshop promoted the utilization of a Universal Hindustani Roman Orthography as a literacy tool that empowers youth' connections with their heritage language and culture.

The workshop activities also enhanced intergenerational communication and storytelling.

Participants Ashfaaq Khan and Nadesa Gounder stated that on a personal level, language loss created an identity crisis for individuals who were already struggling to define themselves in a society that placed an incredible amount of pressure on people to integrate.

Youth participant, Shivran Chandra added that "all these and other such factors put the young generation in a culturally and linguistically precarious position".

Krish Naidu stated: "As descendants of ancestors who are twice displaced with traumatic experiences of migration journeys and the disconnect from their culture and language, the loss has had a profound impact, in particular, for the youth who are New Zealand born and the 1.5 generation who migrated very young".