

# ROLE OF THE ARTS/PERFORMING ARTS IN THE SOCIO CULTURAL PRACTICE OF INDENTURED IMMIGRANTS FROM INDIA TOWARDS NATION BUILDING IN MAURITIUS

**Dr Sheilana Devi Ramdoo**

Lecturer, School of Performing Arts,  
Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Moka, Republic of Mauritius  
Cell: (230)54963168, Email: sramdoo@mgi.ac.mu

## **Abstract**

Following Indian indentured laborer immigration to Mauritius which started in 1834, Indian culture suffered quite a lot. Indian laborers had taken the place of African slaves on the fields. Despite being oppressed, they did cling to a religious consciousness which was maintained through social practices like rituals and festive ceremonies. Some weak remnants of Indian arts/performing arts had accompanied those socio-cultural practices. But unconsciously and unknowingly, across generations, they have built up to become today fundamental carriers of the identity of Indian immigrants in Mauritius. There were very mild forms of expressions which accompanied social practices like gestures, words, recitations, songs, elementary dance steps or movements, special clothings, special food – hence reinforcing the identity of Indian immigrants. Yet till today these weak cultural remains have served as fundamental starting points towards gradual establishment of Indian performing arts education in the Mauritian educational system, including the development of the cultural aspect of Indian performing arts. Did the immigrants ever have time or to what extent were they allowed and willing - to paint, sing, dance or play their miseries? The few remnants of Indian performing arts practiced by immigrants as part of their socio-cultural practices were for e.g. : -The Bhojpuri music, songs, & dance of the Hindi-speaking community, originally from Uttar Pradesh -The kavadi songs, music, & dance of the Tamil-speaking community, originally from Tamil Nadu - The Ganesh Chaturthi songs, music & dances of the Marathi-speaking community, originating from Maharashtra - The Rambhajan songs, music & dances of the Telegu-speaking community, originating from Andhra Pradesh Recent researches have established that performing arts - though merged with social practices of a particular culture, even though an elementary part of the social practices and also, even though practiced in small gatherings - bear a fundamental role towards community/culture building, hence nation - building. The arts/performing arts, are part & parcel of what constitutes powerful unconscious vehicles and propellant drives in the minds of people towards nation building – hence they make their contributions as : - -Markers of Identity -Agents which increase community cohesion -Elements structuring people's lives -Agents which increase a sense of connection and scope for social networks -Catalysts for attainment of community goals, hence the goals of nation-building As descendants of the Indian indentured immigrants, we are proceeding forward today with an identical mindset although we have extrapolated our ancestors' social practice of the performing arts into our educational system and expanded them so as to bring our respective cultural practices closer to authenticity.

**Keywords:** Arts/Performing Arts, Community Cohesion, Structured Life, Sense of Power, Contact with one's Roots, Nation Building

The arrival of Indian indentured immigrants to Mauritius in 1834 opened a continuing chapter in the history of sufferings of Indian culture. Although the indentured laborers, being prominently Indian village folks, were oppressed, they had been clinging to a religious consciousness. This was the key because this religious consciousness which was vehicled through socio cultural practices like rituals and festive ceremonies – was also unconsciously and unknowingly being vehicled through accompanying traces of Indian performing arts. No exact, detailed records exist about the modes of artistic expression of Indian indentured immigrants in Mauritius, but they formed an integral part of socio cultural practices. Apart from the physical aspect, the songs, music and dance often expressed sentiments or moods associated to their daily acts in the profane context for e.g. their agricultural fieldwork, specific events like weddings, births, etc. ; and in the sacred context for e.g. their ritualistic prayers, specific cultural festivities, etc. – but these also helped them to essentially drown their miseries. Did they ever have time or to what extent were they allowed and willing to paint, sing, dance or play their miseries? Some remaining evidences of Indian performing arts through socio cultural practices are for e.g. the Bhojpuri music, song & dance of the Hindi-speaking community, who originated from Uttar Pradesh; the Kavadi songs, music & dance of the Tamil-speaking community, whose origins were from Tamil Nadu; the Ganesh Chaturthi songs, music & dance of the Marathi-speaking community, originally from

Maharashtra; and the Rambhajan songs, music & dance of the Telegu-speaking community, originally from the state of Andhra Pradesh.

There are four features of the arts/performing arts which evolved in Mauritius and which will mainly be considered for the purpose of this paper: 1<sup>stly</sup> - The arts/performing arts will not be considered as an art-form but rather as a process i.e. an art process based on achieving social outcomes where specific critical social and cultural issues required attention. The arts/performing arts will not be considered as a written tradition that involves transposition of a written text into a performative event – but rather as the improvised and ritualized spectrum of human performance ranging for e.g. from folk narratives, songs recitations, elementary gestures & spontaneous movements, music, etc. – for the purpose of entertainment, everyday life enactment of social roles, gender roles, class roles etc. plus for the purpose of socio religious practices. 2<sup>ndly</sup> - The arts/performing arts will not be viewed here as end-products but as part of transformational approaches/vehicles through which people can engage in the joint identification and production of images, symbols and other resources reflective of community visions and aspirations (Sonn et al., 2002). 3<sup>rdly</sup> - The arts/performing arts will be emphasized here amidst a number of semiotic resources to produce meaning and communicate ideas, values and beliefs; and on the other hand, to construct meaning out of the dynamically unfolding interplay of semiotic patterns in performance. 4<sup>thly</sup> - Arts/performing arts will be seen as potential resources that provide a way to index a community's experience, and to participate in the making of "their own history, their own future and their own identity"(Thomas & Rappaport, p. 326).

There are a few aspects of research results indicating the possible contributions which the arts/performing arts could have made through some form of functional roles - even though their presence were elementary, scattered and merged together with socio cultural practices. They were not evident in those days but the natural human factors responsible for influencing the arts/performing arts in the life of people and vice versa, became slowly and gradually clear today through its continuation and further development in the domain of education and culture in Mauritius.

**Structure People's Lives** Being part of socio cultural practices, the arts/performing arts become habitual activities that structure and shape everyday life of communities. They improve physical & psychological well-being (Baklien, 2000; Ball and Keating, 2002; Bygren, Konlaan and Johannson, 1996; Turner and Senior, 2000). Activities or socio cultural practices involving music/song/movement are generally sources of enjoyment – both emotionally and psychologically. Indentured immigrants in Mauritius had suffered from social isolation, from the loss of their loved ones, a deteriorating health and unexpected tedious life transitions. Therefore involvement in the arts/performing arts through socio cultural practices, even if very elementary, could have contributed to some extent to their physical and psychological well-being.

**Gives a Sense of Power** The art process: the process of transforming mud or clay or wood into a usable object – although not as beautiful and technically perfect – but in the same vein, gives an individual a sense of power. The same is true with painting, composing/performing a song, a spoken-word piece, etc. Hence with the arrival of Indian immigrants in Mauritius – a body of archived memories today like their utensils, working tools, original songs and movement expressions reveal the fused bond with the Indian ethos - despite the lack of authenticity and artistic technicality.

**Allow People to Retain Contact with their Roots** Another possible role of the arts/performing arts: any art form or mode of art expression naturally draws on one's culture's tales, myths, legends, songs, etc. They offer a window into a person's soul where his values, attitudes, beliefs, visions are explored and reflected upon. This can be done also with the supportive medium of songs, music, movement, folk narratives, recitations, etc. In the case of Indian indentured immigrants, the main sources of these modes of expressions were the Hindu sacred scriptures. The arts/performing arts contributed or could have definitely contributed to relate to the essence of who they are, where they have come from, and where they are journeying. It could help affirm their sense of being, allowing them to retain contact with their roots.

**Markers of Identity** Community art processes usually involve people who are disadvantaged, people in a poor neighborhood. These are modes of art expressions which become a medium through which communities talk about and express their emotions, their needs, their difficult often day-to-day issues & miseries which they are grappling with. Arts/performing arts can be or could have been partly for Indian immigrants in Mauritius - an agent of communal meanings. Even if the arts/performing arts were part of social practice, they became closely linked to the Indian community's worldview & perception which they feared to lose. The arts/performing arts hence became markers of identity as they helped to reinforce a sense of identity and their impact culminated into a sense of collective identity and pride in the face of danger of acculturation.

**Brings Community Cohesion** The arts/performing arts form a natural connecting point. As part of social practices, the art process is a collaborative, collective experience which builds on social capital by boosting individuals' ability and motivation to be civically engaged. The use of the arts is to strengthen ties by forging connections between people, hence improves the community self-image and status. Hence for the Indian immigrants in Mauritius, the social practice within which the arts/performing arts formed an integral part of, increased a sense of belonging or attachment to their community which in turn, could have offered support towards building the organizational capacity for effective action to move away from their sad plight and improve the destiny of their children for a better future.

**Nation Building** The process of conscientization is a key value to community psychology. The arts/performing arts have been found through research to facilitate the process of conscientization i.e. becoming aware of limiting social, political and historical realities and more importantly, acting in solidarity to transform those realities (Freire, 1972; Martin-Baro, 1994; Montero, 2009). This conscientization process spurs for collective action and collective efficacy. Hence the arts/performing arts can act or could have, in those days, contributed partly as catalysts for attainment of community goals – because the arts/performing arts have been also found to be able to contribute towards creating community-driven vision towards Nation-Building.

**Conclusion** In those Indian immigrant days, in Mauritius, there were very mild forms, practically nearly traces of artistic expressions like songs, recitations, elementary gestures, dance steps, movements, special clothings, special food - which altogether acted to reinforce the identity of Indian immigrants. With the boost-up of Indian arts/performing arts today, in Mauritius, it is evident that – what we had thought were only meagre remnants - have served as fundamental starting points towards gradual establishment of the Indian performing arts in the Mauritian educational system plus the development of the cultural aspect of the Indian performing arts. Traditional religions have long recognized and relied on the cognitive influence of the arts and the fundamental nature of the arts' contribution to the collective processes of thought, memory and perception in society. This contribution is evident in the arts/performing arts contained in Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism – which conveys highly formal integrated worldviews (Merlin 2006, p.6). Although we, in Mauritius, have extrapolated our ancestors' socio cultural practice of the performing arts into our education system and are still striving to expand them so as to bring our inherited forms of arts/performing arts closer to authenticity - as descendants of the Indian indentured immigrant, we are today proceeding forward with one and the same identical mindset. But what is interesting about this inherited mindset from our Indian immigrant ancestors, is that it is totally in keeping with what characterizes an artistic mindset. In any work of art – be it a song, a poem, poetry, painting, pottery, sculpture, music, dance, drama etc... - the idea of standard and quality is the key value. A student of art is made to strive to make his present work of art better than the previous one. Gradually, as the student of art progresses, a spirit of continuous improvement enters the student's mind. He develops gradually focused and sustained attention towards improving the standard and quality of his work of art/his artwork. And this is why True/Real artists never stop in their progression. Whatever level they reach, they are engaged continuously into improving their work. Therefore there is non-stop engagement towards raising the standard and quality of one's work of art. When you have an artistic mind, you are continuously engaged into improving your artwork and eventually yourself - because this spirit of continuous improvement is transferred to & applied in other domains of one's life. An artistic mind always targets for Perfection - Perfection is huge, it is infinite and because it is Infinite, many call It God. Even if we know we cannot or it is too difficult to reach this Perfection, we still strive to near it. And this is why we, Hindus believe firmly in the **value of making efforts to achieve**. I believe this is the most precious treasure that we, Indo-Mauritians have all inherited from our indentured immigrant ancestors from India and which still characterizes us today on this small island of Mauritius.

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