



# Adapting The Ancestral Spirit: The Evolution Of Indigenous Sports From Kalaripattu To The Girmitiya Diaspora

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**Abstract:** In the 19th century, the indenture system relocated numerous Indians, later known as the Girmitiya community, to nations like Fiji, Mauritius, and Guyana. Alongside their socio-religious customs, these migrants transported traditional Indian physical practices. This qualitative, descriptive study explores how this diaspora preserved indigenous sports such as Pehlwani, Kabaddi, and Kho-Kho. Drawing a historical parallel with the monk Bodhidharma's transmission of martial arts to China, the research illustrates how physical culture travels and adapts globally. Ultimately, it highlights how these traditional games successfully maintained cultural identity and fostered community cohesion among migrant descendants.

**Index Terms** - Girmitiya Diaspora, Indigenous Sports, Cultural Identity, Traditional Physical Culture (Kalaripattu), Diaspora Heritage.

## Introduction

The history of human migration is often told through the lens of economics, politics, and labor. However, the migration of culture—specifically physical culture—offers an equally compelling narrative about survival, identity, and resilience. Following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, colonial authorities faced a massive labor shortage on their sugar, tea, and rubber plantations. To resolve this, they established the Indian indenture system. Between 1834 and 1917, over a million Indians were transported across the oceans to colonies like Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and South Africa. These laborers signed an agreement, or "girit" (a mispronunciation of the word "agreement"), and thus became known as the Girmitiyas.

The journey across the "Kala Pani" (black waters) and the subsequent life on the plantations were marked by severe hardship, strict colonial oversight, and cultural isolation. Stripped of their familiar surroundings, the Girmitiyas had to find ways to recreate a sense of home in alien environments. While much historical attention has been given to their preservation of religious texts like the Ramayana or the continuation of traditional music and festivals, the role of physical culture is often overlooked.

The Girmitiyas brought with them a deep-rooted tradition of indigenous sports and physical games from the rural heartlands of regions like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and southern India. In the scarce leisure time afforded to them, the plantation barracks transformed into spaces of cultural revival. Men practiced Pehlwani (traditional wrestling) on patches of cleared earth, while children and youth played Kabaddi, Gilli Danda, and Lagori.

These indigenous sports were not merely pastimes. In a colonial system designed to extract physical labor and break the individual spirit, engaging in native physical disciplines became an act of silent resistance. It was a way to reclaim ownership of their own bodies, build physical strength on their own terms, and forge a collective identity. This paper explores how the Girmitiya community became unwitting ambassadors of Indian physical culture, embedding indigenous sports into the social fabric of their host nations and ensuring that the heartbeat of their ancestral homeland survived across generations.

## Review of Literature

To fully understand how the Girmitiya community preserved and promoted their indigenous sports abroad, it is essential to look at the broader history of how Indian physical culture travels across borders. This review explores literature concerning the ancient transmission of physical disciplines, the realities of the colonial indenture system, and the ways displaced communities use culture to survive.

First, the concept of Indian physical practices migrating and adapting is not a modern phenomenon. Zarrilli (1998), in his authoritative study on South Indian martial arts, establishes that disciplines like Kalaripattu were deeply tied to both physical conditioning and mental resilience. The historical accounts of the monk Bodhidharma taking these foundational movements from India to China serve as a timeless model for cross-cultural adaptation. Zarrilli's work highlights that when indigenous physical culture moves to a new geography, it does not just survive; it evolves to meet the needs of its new environment. This ancient paradigm is crucial for the current study, as it sets the theoretical stage for how later generations of migrating Indians would carry their own rural sports across the oceans.

Moving to the 19th-century colonial era, the literature shifts to how these cultural practices survived under extreme hardship. Lal (2000) provides a vital understanding of the indenture system and the daily lives of the Girmitiyas. Lal challenges the older historical perspective that viewed indentured laborers merely as passive victims of colonial exploitation. Instead, he emphasizes their immense personal agency. He documents how they actively reconstructed their social worlds and village structures in the barracks of Fiji, Mauritius, and the Caribbean. While Lal focuses heavily on social and religious reconstruction, his framework perfectly explains the presence of indigenous sports: organizing traditional wrestling (Pehlwani) or Kabaddi matches was a way for laborers to reclaim control over their physical bodies in an oppressive plantation system.

The psychological need to hold onto one's homeland through these physical practices is further supported by Vertovec (2000). In his comparative study of the Indian diaspora, Vertovec argues that recreating village-level traditions was the primary coping mechanism for displaced Indians. He notes that rural festivals and community gatherings became the essential arenas for maintaining social cohesion. Building on this, Expanding on the concept of community reconstruction, Mahase (2019), in her analysis of Roopnarine's *The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora*, highlights that the defining characteristics of the indentured Indian experience were 'mobility and agency.' Rather than remaining passive subjects of the colonial labor system, these migrants actively utilized their shared cultural and physical pastimes to dismantle rigid, inherited caste barriers. On the sports field, physical ability and teamwork took precedence over social hierarchy, allowing them to forge a new, unified, and resilient Girmitiya identity.

The concept of diaspora has been widely studied to understand how migrant communities maintain their identity in new environments. John (2023) explains that the Indian diaspora reflects a continuous process of cultural adaptation while preserving links with the homeland. This idea is further supported by Chaudhary and Singh (2024), who highlight that memory, traditions and shared experiences play a key role in sustaining cultural identity among Girmitiya communities.

Research on Girmitiya history shows that indentured labourers maintained their cultural practices despite difficult conditions. Singh and Chapparban (2023) emphasize that traditions such as language, festivals and community activities helped preserve identity across generations. Similarly, Jayaram (2022) discusses how Girmitiya communities in Trinidad developed a distinct cultural identity by adapting their traditions to new social settings.

Studies also highlight the importance of cultural resilience in diaspora communities. Kumar and Bates (2024) note that Girmitiya populations maintained strong cultural continuity even while adjusting to different environments. Upadhyay (2022) further explains that cultural expressions such as literature and social practices contributed to identity formation.

However, most of the existing literature focuses on migration, culture and identity, while very little attention has been given to the role of indigenous sports. Traditional games and physical activities are

important aspects of cultural life, yet they remain under-researched in the Girmitiya context. This study aims to address this gap by examining how indigenous sports contributed to cultural preservation and social cohesion among Girmitiya communities in different countries.

## Historical Context of Cultural Transmission

To truly understand the impact of the Girmitiya migration on global physical culture, it is essential to recognize that the transportation of Indian physical disciplines across borders is not a modern phenomenon. It follows a historical pattern established centuries earlier. The ultimate archetype for this kind of cultural transmission is found in the ancient journey of the Buddhist monk Bodhidharma.

One of the earliest and most discussed examples of such cultural transmission is associated with Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk who is believed to have travelled from India to China around the 5th–6th century CE. Historical and academic studies agree that Bodhidharma played a significant role in the spread of Buddhist philosophy, particularly the development of Chan (Zen) Buddhism in China. His teachings focused on meditation, discipline and mental clarity, which later became central elements of Chinese Buddhist practice.

During the 5th or 6th century CE, Bodhidharma traveled from the southern regions of the Indian subcontinent to China, driven by a mission to spread Chan (Zen) Buddhism. According to historical tradition and martial arts lore, upon arriving at the Shaolin Monastery, he observed that the resident monks were physically frail. Their bodies had weakened due to prolonged hours of seated meditation, leaving them vulnerable and unable to sustain the rigorous demands of spiritual enlightenment.

In addition to spiritual teachings, some traditional narratives suggest that Bodhidharma introduced physical exercises to monks at the Shaolin Temple. These exercises were believed to improve strength, flexibility and endurance, especially for monks who spent long hours in meditation. Such practices emphasized the balance between mental and physical development, highlighting the idea that a healthy body supports a focused mind.

To remedy this, Bodhidharma introduced a series of dynamic physical exercises, breathing techniques, and martial movements deeply rooted in the ancient Indian martial art of Kalaripattu. By blending intense physical conditioning with the deep mental focus of meditation, he created a holistic mind-body discipline. As these Indian techniques adapted to the Chinese environment and merged with local philosophies, they eventually evolved into what is globally recognized today as Chinese Kung Fu.

This ancient transformation provides a vital theoretical framework for the current study. Bodhidharma's journey proves that when physical culture migrates, it does not merely survive in a vacuum; it adapts, evolves, and fundamentally alters the cultural landscape of its new home. The Kalaripattu-to-Kung-Fu evolution stands as a timeless paradigm of diasporic resilience and cultural transformation. When the Girmitiya laborers boarded ships for the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa centuries later, they were unknowingly participating in this exact same historical tradition. They took indigenous physical practices born in the dust of Indian villages and planted them in foreign soil, where they would grow, adapt, and help sustain new hybrid societies.

Instead, what can be understood more accurately is that Bodhidharma's contribution lies in promoting a system that combines mental discipline, meditation and physical conditioning. This integrated approach influenced the development of Shaolin culture, where physical training, breathing techniques and meditation became interconnected. These elements contributed to both mental development (such as concentration and awareness) and physical development (such as strength and endurance) among practitioners.

## Objectives of the Study

- **Trace Migration:** To map the historical global movement of Indian physical culture.
- **Identify Sports:** To pinpoint specific indigenous games like Kabaddi and Pehlwani brought by Girmitiya laborers.
- **Analyze Adaptation:** To examine how these traditional sports evolved within host countries.
- **Evaluate Impact:** To assess their crucial role in building social cohesion and preserving diaspora identity.

## Research Methodology

This qualitative study employs a descriptive approach, analyzing historical and cultural sources to trace the movement of Indian physical traditions beyond borders, specifically focusing on the Girmitiya diaspora. Data was collected from secondary sources, like journals, books, and academic documents, examining traditional sports like Kabaddi, Kho-Kho, and Pehlwani. Thematic analysis was applied to understand how these sports functioned for cultural survival and social cohesion.

## Indigenous Sports Carried by Girmitiya Community

When the Girmitiya laborers left their homes in regions like Bihar and the United Provinces, they carried very few physical belongings to the distant colonial plantations. However, they brought a rich heritage deeply ingrained in their minds and bodies: the traditional sports of rural India. In the harsh conditions of their new environments, they turned to these familiar physical activities to find comfort and build community. They introduced Pehlwani (traditional wrestling), creating makeshift dirt pits called akharas near their barracks where men could showcase their strength and discipline. They also played team sports like Kabaddi and Kho-Kho, which were incredibly popular because they required zero equipment—just human energy and an open patch of land. For the youth, grassroots games like Gilli Danda (played with wooden sticks) and Lagori (seven stones) were passed down to keep them active while their parents worked. Even specialized physical arts like Malkhamb (pole gymnastics) saw practice, with athletes adapting by using local trees. Ultimately, these indigenous sports were not just games; they were vital tools that helped the displaced laborers stay connected to their roots and forge a united identity in foreign lands.

## Role in Cultural Identity and Social Cohesion

Indigenous sports were essential for shaping the cultural identity and social cohesion of the Girmitiya community. Playing traditional games like Kabaddi and Pehlwani provided a vital psychological anchor, helping displaced laborers maintain a living connection to their Indian roots. Furthermore, these sports acted as powerful social unifiers. In the plantations, the shared experience of physical play helped break down the strict caste and religious barriers that existed back home. On the playing field, skill mattered more than social hierarchy. This equality forged a new, unified community, giving them collective pride and resilience against the harsh colonial system.

## Challenges and Changes

Despite their historical importance, indigenous Indian sports face significant challenges today. As host nations modernized, Western sports like cricket and football became institutionalized and well-funded. Younger generations of the diaspora naturally shifted toward these global games for better social and economic opportunities. Additionally, traditional sports like Pehlwani and Kabaddi suffered from a lack of formal organization, sponsorship, and dedicated playing spaces as communities moved from rural estates to urban areas. The fast-paced modern lifestyle leaves little room for the intense daily practice these older disciplines require, leading to a gradual decline in their active participation.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research highlight a profound parallel between ancient and modern cultural migrations. Just as Bodhidharma carried the physical and spiritual essence of Kalaripattu to China, resulting in the creation of Kung Fu, the Girmitiya laborers carried the essence of rural Indian sports across the oceans, fundamentally altering the cultural landscapes of Fiji, Mauritius, and the Caribbean.

The study reveals that indigenous sports were never just leisure activities for the diaspora; they were essential survival tools. They provided a space for the laborers to reclaim autonomy over their bodies, which the colonial system sought to own. The transition from rigid caste hierarchies to a unified community was significantly accelerated on the playing fields, demonstrating that physical education possesses an inherent power to drive social reform.

However, the discussion also points to an inevitable cultural evolution. The Bodhidharma paradigm teaches us that for a culture to survive, it must adapt. In the modern era, while the daily practice of

Pehlواني or Gilli Danda has diminished in favor of Western sports, the foundational impact remains. The physical resilience cultivated in the akharas and Kabaddi fields of the 19th century laid the groundwork for the modern sporting success of the Indian diaspora. The games may have changed, but the spirit of community, physical discipline, and cultural pride established by the original Girmitiyas continues to thrive in their descendants.

## Conclusion

The Girmitiya community's history exemplifies remarkable human endurance, playing a crucial role in globalizing indigenous Indian sports. Evolving from harsh plantation environments to modern diaspora societies, these traditional physical practices bridged the gap between a distant homeland and their new lives. Similar to Bodhidharma's ancient cultural transmission, this migration proves that physical traditions are dynamic, adaptable forces capable of leaving lasting global legacies. Although contemporary challenges threaten active participation in these ancient games, the resilience and community cohesion they originally fostered remain deeply rooted. Ultimately, these sports transcended mere entertainment; they actively built communities, safeguarded cultural identities, and immortalized the ancestral spirit across generations.

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