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ISLAND DIASPORIC ISSUES: EXPRESSION OF INDIAN CULTURE IN OLD HINDU HOUSES OF MAURITIUS

Abstract

This article investigates how reminiscences of the Indian heritage gathered by Hindu settlers (indentured labourers) through their initial huts / houses have affected culture in the small island nation of Mauritius during the Colonial context. The Interconnectedness of Culture and Architecture, characterised as Anthropo-Architecture by (Sfintes 2019: 2), constitutes a starting point, while colonial hegemonic conditions act as the backdrop of this article. It is not only the physical spaces of the initial houses that are of concern, but also the underlying principles that guided their implementation, preservation, and close relationship with the lifestyle of people. Some of the major architectural elements, the possible links to Indian vernacular architecture, and their usage will be discussed and their contributions to keeping the distinct Indian culture alive, over the early generations of Indian settlement in Mauritius. Brief proposals for future applications and eventual avenues for other research will also be presented.

Keywords: *Architectural Anthropology, Traditional Mauritian houses, Syncretic cultures, Indo-Mauritian culture, Culture.*

Introduction

Indentured labourers were brought to Mauritius from various parts of India in great numbers by the British as from 1834, adding to the already existing population of Indian origin that were previously brought as slaves and artisans, as iterated by Teelock (1998: 5) in her book, Bitter Sugar. They provided the British as an alternative and cheap labour to fill the gap created by the abolition of slavery. By 1924, when this practice stopped, the population of Indian origin who decided to settle in Mauritius was 238,344. This represented a staggering percentage of about 74.5% of the total population of that epoch (Holmberg 1962: 18).

They initially faced much difficulty as they not only were far from their home county but also their working conditions were just as bad as that of slaves[1]. However, Indentured labourers also had a culture of working hard, saving money, and a general inclination towards land ownership. "The decision to acquire a plot of land is perhaps the most influential event in the life of the

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Indian immigrants as well as in the history of the island" says Sada Reddi (2017) in an article published in the Mauritius Times.

From their first living quarters and execrable living conditions, those that decided to stay in Mauritius[2] toiled to change their socio-economic status. Many among them slowly bought land for cultivation from the white owners. The first-generation Indians, after completing their contractual obligation, set up small villages where they stayed. Despite their hard living conditions and the several natural catastrophes such as cyclones and epidemics they regularly faced, they reproduced the social structure they knew based on religious, caste system or relationship they formed with other travellers on the ships they came, says L'Estrac J C (2020: 72) in his book Terres-Possession et Dépossession. The name Indo-Mauritians was attributed to them as they got more involved in the economics of the country and their participation in the real estate sector grew at a sustainable rate, as the Sugar sector saw a boom after the World War II.

The population of Indo-Mauritians also strikingly increased because of high fecundity and because of notable improvement in the health services, reducing child mortality and increasing life expectancy (Holmberg 1962: 19). As a result, the typical Indo-Mauritian family was large and shared one house in the extended family structure, imitating what they could remember from their lifestyles in their village of origin in India. As their financial conditions improved, so did their living conditions. They built better houses in straw, mud mixed with cow dung[3], timber, corrugated sheets, glass and sometimes stone. Though many houses adopted elements of the colonial Architectural language[4] such as pitched roofs and timber openings with shutters, heavily present on the Island at the time, they lived according to their native Indian cultures.

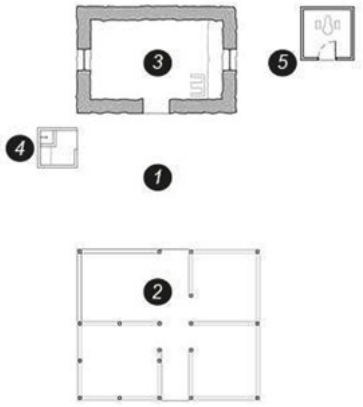
This article examines the ways of life that took place in and around the original houses built by the first Hindu Indo-Mauritian settlers and their descendants up to the 1960s when cyclone Carol hit the Island and devastated a large number of houses. After this period, house building systems changed drastically as concrete and cement block were introduced in Mauritius and the generations thereafter lived in more solid houses and in nuclear family structure. The drastic change in construction technique and lifestyle can constitute a basis for further research not presently covered in this article.

Mauritian vernacular house concept – remembering the Indian lifestyle.

Initially, a common type[5] of Indo-Mauritian houses comprised of small, fragmented units, each dedicated a different household activity and all organised around a central gathering area. The main sitting area, '*la varangue*', and sleeping areas in one small building. Opposite to it, across a common outdoor gathering area was placed the kitchen and dining unit, while an outdoor space

close to the kitchen unit was dedicated to dish washing. The latrine, generally considered as dirty space, was placed further away from the other areas in yet another small building unit and finally the animal shed was located further at the back of the Kitchen area.

Figure 1: Typical plan of early Hindu Indo-Mauritian house and its various components. 1. Common gathering space; 2. Sleeping unit; 3. Kitchen unit; 4. Washing area; 5. Latrine.



There are several unique aspects of the traditional Indian culture and lifestyle that were kept alive through the vernacular houses built by the Indo-Mauritian settlers though it is doubtful that they could have brought anything with except the memory of their village life of origin given the appalling conditions in which they were brought to Mauritius. Furthermore, since most Indentured labourers were already living in dire situations in India and saw moving to Mauritius a means to improve their conditions, it is safe to assume that elaborate Architectural and cultural ideas may not have been present in their daily lives.

At the same time, adaptation to local conditions, local climatic challenges and economic difficulties must have compelled them to abandon many lifestyle patterns while forgetfulness over successive generations may also have led to loss of yet more culture. On the other hand, local building materials and techniques, different from those used in India were adopted. Houses acted mostly as means of providing basic shelter while cultural conservation could not have been a major preoccupation since their most pressing concern was survival. Therefore, culture must have been preserved and eventually transmitted mostly through memory, habits, and experience.

Many Architectural elements and cultural trait managed to survive despite the numerous setbacks. This idea is corroborated by Karani, (2014: 29) when she says that “psychology and subconscious of people are affected by the space they live in”.

This article lists lifestyles and Architectural elements that have contributed to keeping distinct Indian culture alive over the early generations of settlement and tries to relate their relevance in the contemporary Mauritius.

Figure 2a: Picture of common gathering area and early Hindu Indo-Mauritian house. Source: https://vintagemauritius.org

Figure 2b: Picture of Extended family and early Hindu Indo-Mauritian house. Source: https://vintagemauritius.org

The extended family

Prior to looking at the Architectural elements, it is important to understand cultural context of Hindu families of the time. They followed the extended family structure since it was not only a perpetuation of an ancient culture but also an effective way for families, despite being large, to survive by living together under one roof, sharing scarce resources, facing the numerous difficulties of the time, and resolving problems as one entity. Since the literacy rate of the Indentured labourers was low, the extended family system had relevance as it valued wisdom based on experience of life, repetition of traditions and continuation of established habits that were passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation.

Elders, considered head of the family based on their wisdom and life experience, took decisions that were diligently followed by other family members. While the male members were earners of the family, they remitted all their earnings to the eldest female in the house, generally the Grandmother.

Grandmothers were decision makers and controlled the household. They managed all the expenses, did all the chores, prepared food and were responsible for the upbringing of children.

Though houses were tiny, made of basalt stone and hay, families and neighbourhoods were close-knit and followed well-defined familial hierarchies. People enjoyed great social proximity and togetherness despite or perhaps because of their low socio-economic status, Bathala, (2005: 145).

Religious beliefs

Indentured labourers arrived in Mauritius from the Indian states of Bihar, Andra Pradesh and Maharastra, adding to an already existing small population of people of Indian origin who previously came as slaves and Artisans from Tamil Nadu during the French occupation, depicted Chazan-Gillig & Ramhota P (2023: 11) in their book Hinduism and Popular Cults in Mauritius. The Indian population in Mauritius followed different religious beliefs, namely Hindus, Muslims, Tamils, Telegus, and Marathis, as well as further *caste*[6] subdivisions among each of those beliefs. Religious beliefs and traditions were undoubtedly crucial to all the Indo-Mauritians as these embodied links to their motherland and shared loyalties to the nation-state, Bathala, (2005: 143). However, the scope of this article examines only the links between *Vernacular Architecture* of Mauritius and the early Hindus that came as Indentured labourers and demonstrates, in parallel, the need for further in-depth research for every other religion present on the Island as well as the syncretism that evolved over several generations.

The Hindu belief system is very complex and varies with different caste categories, let alone the various adaptations, adjustments, and amalgamations that occurred in a migration situation. Even the authenticity of the modern understanding of the caste system among the Hindus of Mauritius is questionable since it underwent major disruptions of continuity due to migration Chazan-Gillig & Ramhota P (2023: 12). Hindus somehow managed to keep their religious beliefs alive through their religious practices, traditions, festivals, and value systems even though the way religion and traditions were practised in the early years of migration and the modern way has many differences.

The Hindu principle of design is directed by the ancient system of *Vaastu shastra,* which prescribes ways to transcribe simultaneously universal, spiritual, global, and personal ideals in living space following the holistic aspect of the Hindu philosophy, which considers everything from the universe to the tiniest of particles as interrelated.

The resilient essence of the deep Hindu philosophy endured in the early villages and Hindu houses of Mauritius and was later reinforced by modern and scholastic concepts as the country developed and while Hindus tried to

establish more formal ideas and practices in the country, Chazan-Gillig & Ramhota P (2023: 38). However, the concept of interconnection was greatly emphasised through veneration and the various types of temples set up for different uses. The *Kalimai* was the neighbourhood prayer place, the *Hanuman* temple was a small prayer area in the front yard of a house, and the *pooja ghar* acted as the personal praying area of the family usually located in niches of the thick stone walls of the house. The *Sandhya,* performed in the house every evening at was obligatory for every member of the family. Furthermore, the Indo-Mauritians set up a system, through *baihtkas*[7] where transmission of religious and moral values, socio-cultural connections and other community activities were carried out. Sarita Boodhoo iterates the role of the Baithka in Mauritius in an article published in the Mauritius times on August 27, 2010.

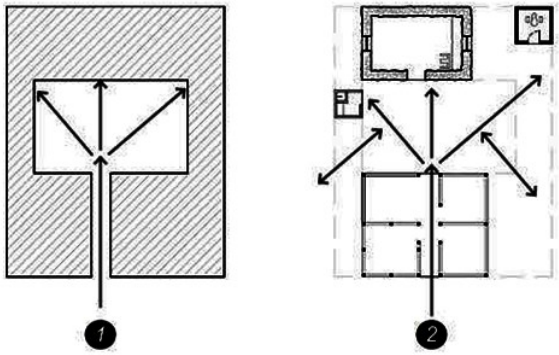
The first Indo-Mauritian Hindus placed many elements of their house by habit, based on what they could remember from their native villages and by adoption of ways of other local cultures already present in the country. The house was considered as a small temple and a mirror of the macrocosm following the Hindu philosophy. Outdoor footwear was not allowed inside the house and if barefoot, people used to wash their feet before entering the house as if entering a Hindu temple. The Position of every item in a house was undoubtedly out of memory and habit at first and was believed to hold great importance in maintaining peacefulness of the household. Scholastic parallels can clearly be drawn between the early habits observed in houses and principles of Vaastu Shastra. The *Griha pravesh* prayer enacts the same principle and so does the celebration of the threshold or *chaukhat*, as symbol of transition between two realms namely the outside, seen as public, and the inside, seen as private. Thus, the position of the washrooms and dish washing, considered dirty, were outside and away from the other clean spaces and clothes washing was done at the bank of nearby rivers. The *Chulha*, Cooking place, was also oriented according to Vaastu principles.

The Courtyard

What is categorised as a courtyard house encapsulates a multitude of typologies with several variations in various cultures around the world Rapoport, (2007: 57) and is not unique to India Gupta & Joshi, (2021: 2262) though certain types are embedded in the Indian vernacular house architecture and culture for centuries. A specific type of self-sufficient courtyard house, that occurred in warm and humid regions of India such as Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata, defined by Bera, (2019: 16388), is of concern in this article since it matches the regions where Indentured labourers came and since it has startling similarities with the early Indo-Mauritian houses. It presents three distinct layers Gupta & Joshi, (2021: 2262). The innermost space, usually open to sky is the courtyard. It is surrounded by a second layer that is semi-open and act as transition into the third layer, the enclosed space.

In Mauritius the courtyard was commonly called *aangan* by Hindu Indo-Mauritians. It occurred as loose and unbuilt space in the centre of the different scattered individual units that comprised their house. It acquired strong cultural significance as polyvalent residual space between two building blocks that permitted intricate interconnections for the family. First, it acted as a common meeting point for the whole family, for example it was the place where daily activities like cutting of vegetables for food preparation was done, where children could play and interact with other members of the family as well as with free range animals, or where elders of the family spent their free time, among many other activities. Secondly, the courtyard was also a place where relatives, acquaintances and neighbours could meet the family for events or simply for the very frequent informal visits. Thirdly, it was the central space and focal point of the house where the *tulsi* tree was normally planted and where daily prayers were carried out.

Figure 3: 1. Conceptual drawing of typical Vernacular courtyard house from Mumbai, Chennai & Kolkata. 2. Typical loose version of courtyard houses built by Hindu Indo-Mauritian settlers.



The first villages were comprised of several such courtyard houses. Boundary lines between neighbours, constituted of simple plants, low stone walls or loose corrugated sheets, were blurred and not well defined. Connections, communication, and interaction between neighbours were core to the community and traits like sharing, tolerance, empathy, and sense of togetherness prevailed though they had very little material possessions and were mostly illiterate. This idea is corroborated by Kühnen & Kitayama, (2024: 1) when they points out that people of low social classes have the tendency to be more interdependent.

History witnesses that due to the numerous constraints of the coolies of Mauritius and their families, the local courtyard house models could not have been as well articulated and well established as their Indian counterparts though many cultural traits managed to survive. An in-depth comparison between the Indian vernacular courtyard house and that which occurred in

Mauritius can constitute as ground for future studies in the field.

The Veranda

Conceptually, Indian vernacular courtyard houses also had a layer of semi-open or transitional space surrounding a courtyard Gupta & Joshi, (2021: 2262). This in-between covered space was open on the courtyard side and was bounded by walls of the enclosed areas behind. It acted as buffer area between inside and outside, protected the enclosed spaces from direct exposure sun and rain, allowed cross ventilation throughout the house, and provided a space for various activities.

The evolution of verandas in the early Indo-Mauritian house may have had some footing in the Indian vernacular houses of the regions of origin but can also have some derivative from existing colonial houses of the Island, though the colonial veranda typology does not surround an internal courtyard but surrounds the house externally. The large veranda, around the central gathering space (courtyard), as found in courtyard houses of India Gupta & Joshi, (2021: 2262) was not replicated in Mauritius, perhaps because of economic reasons. Instead, a much smaller replicate took prominence.

It was mostly located facing the internal gathering area, in the sleeping area unit.

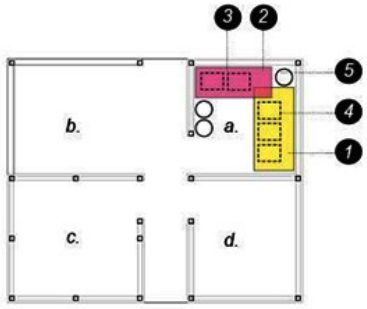
In some instances, road facing verandas could be found, maybe inspired by the colonial house of the time. Such external verandas were eventually enclosed with thin long glass panels and timber framing to maximise usage regardless of weather conditions and to provide a sense of privacy, an important trait of the Indo-Mauritians.

Regardless of its origin, the veranda has always been an integral part of the typical Indo-Mauritian culture as a dynamic semi-open space that offered a buffer between inside and outside. They were ideal for resting and for other activities during hot summer days as they provided shade while allowing cool breeze to flow.

The Godon

A term that may have been originated from the English word Godown, meaning warehouse, was about 2m x 2.5m that housed many activities of the Indo-Mauritian households. Its small size didn't make it a full room but a semi-room that usually contained a bed used for resting during the day or to accommodate the many children of the family. It also had a table for ironing clothes and shelves above for various other storage. The small size and multitude of activities that could be done in the Godon made it a relevant solution for many families to maximise usage with limited available means.

Figure 4: Typical plan of early Godon and its position in the sleeping unit. a. Godon; b. Veranda; c. Bedroo,m; d. Bedroom 1. Bed; 2. Table for ironing and other activities; 3. Storage below and above table; 4. Storage below bed; 5. Storage in boxes in every spare corner of the Godon.



The Godon being a polyvalent space that does not have a conventional definition as it sits somewhere between a corridor and a room in size. However, it represents resilience, adaptability, sacrifice, hard work, and struggle of the Indo-Mauritian families during the early years of settlement. It was on major element that allowed large families of 8-10 children to have a shelter and survive harsh times with meagre means and in small built spaces.

The need for the Godon gradually disappeared as the country developed and the socio-economic status of the population improved. However, with constant increase in cost of living, construction cost and price of land in Mauritius, could the Godon regain viability for the future houses of Mauritius?

Secondary kitchen

Food preparation is a sacred act among Hindus. "In Hindu culture, eating is a ritual: a sacrifice to the Supreme, unified by the recognition that process (cooking), object (food), and individual are all inextricably connected" according to an article entitled The sacred Act of Eating: A Hindu Foodie's Daily Ritual, published on Huffpost website in 2011. The kitchen, being the place where food is prepared, is traditionally guided by several organisational principles dictated by the age-old Vaastu shastra. These principles were only loosely followed, not in any formal manner, in the early Indo-Mauritian kitchens through centuries of trial and error, habit, and repetition. The scholastic and philosophical parallel was only made several generations later when the literacy rate increased in Mauritius.

The early kitchens, despite being small, had every kitchen activity ascribed a specific place either inside or outside in the close vicinity of the built unit. Cooking was done inside the small kitchen unit by squatting in front of the *chulha* placed in one extremity of the building while the smoke generated helped in protecting the timber elements of the kitchen unit from termites and other insects. Eating was mostly done sitting on the floor on

rattan *chattai* near the *chulha* while the roof space, wall tops and cavities were used for storage. Other kitchen activities such as vegetable cutting, and grain crushing in the *chakki* were carried out in the common gathering space while the occasional chicken, meat, and fish cutting, considered unclean when raw, was kept outside and so was dish washing which was done in a dedicated outdoor space next to the kitchen unit. Indo-Mauritian kitchens were in stark contrast, socially and culturally, with the large kitchens of the traditional colonial houses where mostly the house help worked, away from the main spaces and where positioning of kitchen activities was not guided by any philosophical principles other than organisational logic.

The Indian and western kitchen unit types underwent major amalgamations as the country developed. The western Internal kitchen found its way into residential Architecture as cooking and eating processes got modernised. The *chulha* gave way to kerosene and eventually gas cookers while eating using hands in copper plates on the floor gave way to forks and spoons on well-designed dining tables.

Nonetheless, a derivative of the initial Indo-Mauritian kitchen has been retained in the form of a Secondary kitchen, also called back kitchen or outdoor kitchen. They mostly occurred in the form of outdoor but covered areas in the vicinity of the main indoor kitchen and were mainly used for heavy cooking required for large family gatherings or for preparation of very elaborate mixed cultural dishes like the *Briani*, fried noodles, the *dholpuri* or cakes for festivals[8].

The secondary kitchen has remained as another strong 'in-between space'[9] of the Mauritian household and held several other uses over time. In addition to cooking, the protected space became helpful for clothes washing and drying during rainy seasons, storage for gardening tools or gas cylinders, for DIY activities, herb cultivation, bicycle shed, traditional food preparations such as pickle making and countless other activities. The traditional *roche laver*, used for washing of clothes, and the *roche cari*, used for making pulps by mixing herbs and spices, are still part of many local households. They are typically located near outdoor kitchens, easily accessible from the main kitchen through a back door.

Wall thickenings and adaptable storage

People that had kitchen units with walls built in basalt stones and a roof made of straw on timber structures, used the top of the walls for storage, while at some places, the walls had built-in cavities for storage purposes. The timber structures of the roof were used to hang onion and garlic for drying and storage.

Making use of every available space to its maximum was a trait of the Indo-Mauritian family. They were self-sufficient as they cultivated most of their vegetables and spices and had to store the excess in various ways. Garlic,

onion, *Karipoule,* and chilli, common ingredients in the Indian food culture, were dried while some fruits were made into pickle for preservation. Garlic was hung in the kitchen timber structure for storage and was believed to repel mosquitoes and other insects.

Generations of scarcity must have compelled people to develop an interdependent attitude Kühnen & Kitayama (2024: 1), resulting in saving for anticipated potential future shortages for their families and that of their immediate surroundings. The traditional house thus also acted as a storage space with every spare space optimised to keep necessary provisions.

Protection and security – The Jaali, roof overhangs and shutter windows

The Indian vernacular house is reminiscent of many cultural inclinations that were tried, tested, amended, and adopted over many centuries of informal evolution. Among those were notions of privacy, security, and protection against adversities of nature that dictated the development and continued use of semi-opaque screens also known as *Jaalis*, solid timber shutters to openings and roof overhangs. Since India is a mixture of many cultures over a large territory, the expressions of these elements and material used for their construction are diverse in the Indian Vernacular models.

The cultural traits of a need for privacy and security together with a more universal need for protection against adversities of nature remained engrained in the psyche of the Indentured labourers when they left their native villages and settled in Mauritius. The sub-tropical fauna of Mauritius, filled with a myriad of insects, reinforced the need for these expressions in early local houses.

When the Hindu Indo-Mauritians started building their own houses, the use of jaalis, hand made in thin cloth, locally available rattan, bamboo or sometimes timber, was perpetuated in Mauritius with some adjustments that were perhaps due to the availability of materials and local craftsmanship. They were used either as light separation between spaces or on opening and were built in a way that they allowed air circulation through the house, offered protection from the sun, and gave privacy to the user at the same time. Some were also used to prevent insects from getting into the house. The Jaalis were perfect examples of a simple, passively sustainable, and effective solution practiced in local traditional houses.

Roof overhangs, mostly for protection against climatic conditions, were found both in the vernacular huts and early colonial houses though their origins, detailing and construction materials were different in both models. Straw roofs of the Hindu Indo-Mauritian huts were allowed to extend beyond the walls such that they would form a layer of overhang around the house, protecting the stone walls from sun and wind.

Indo-Mauritians also used wooden or metal windows and doors that were secured from inside with cast iron bars. They not only provided added security to the openings but also acted as cyclone bar, protecting the openings from cyclonic winds[10]. When closed, they brought opacity to the openings and gave privacy to the household. They also represent a duality in cultural expression whereby on one hand there was a need for transparency, light and ventilation through openings and on the other hand there was also a need for privacy for certain times of the day.

All these elements constituted overlapping layers of expression found in vernacular houses and are very much representative of the deep and diverse culture that the Hindu Indo-Mauritians inherited.

Contemporary applications

The house still holds a sacred position among Mauritian Hindus. Practices, especially related to Vaastu Shastra and veneration, have been continually practiced since the early settlements, first in very informal ways, but later reinforced by philosophical grounding inspired from Hindu scriptures and scholastic philosophies.

However, over time, many elements of the early Hindu Indo-Mauritian house were gradually abandoned. A sustained stable economic progress brought an acceleration in the pace of life and an increase in the cost of living over the years. Though Mauritians now have improved Socio-economic status, are more educated, have smaller families and have far greater exposure to the world than previous generations, the value of the traditional family and neighbourhood bonds can be said to be decreasing. This can be deduced by comparing the way buildings and neighbourhoods were organised in the past and now. Houses were small on large plots of land, while boundary walls between neighbours were loose in the past, whereas the contemporary houses are bigger on much smaller plots of land in rigid neighbourhoods and demarcated by strong rigid boundary walls. Families, if any, are now smaller, more isolated, and increasingly detached from each other. Furthermore, movement of families from Rural to Urban areas, and shift from extended to nuclear family system have also brought a shift of culture and values.

Many elements of the early Hindu Indo-Mauritian house typology have the potential to enhance disappearing but essential qualities of the Mauritian culture. It is essential to sustain what managed to survive while, at the same time, identify and revive those that had become obsolete over time but may provide solutions for future foreseeable problems of local society.

Contemporary houses of Mauritius do not have the *Godon* anymore. However, the recent hike in land price together with soaring construction costs are becoming hard realities for Mauritians. It is getting harder and harder for people to afford a house while ownership of large pieces of land like the

Indo-Mauritians is very rare. Therefore, the ideas of flexible and multi-usage spaces represented by the *Godon* should not be discarded as they may yet find relevance in a not-so-distant future. Furthermore, it is perhaps more relevant to integrate the notion of loose spaces with varied uses in local houses today more than ever as the need to reduce wastage and heighten the crucial social, cultural, and environmental benefits is being felt.

The tradition of inviting relatives and acquaintances over for religious festivals and other celebrations, though much less frequent now than before, has remained in the Hindu families of today. This aspect transcends all ethnic belongings and has always acted as a vehicle promoting multicultural values and creating strong bonds amongst people. The vernacular Hindu Indo-Mauritian house always encompassed solutions for the family visits and fondness for gatherings. The need to promote social visits and gatherings as part of our unique cultural identity is perhaps even greater today. A reaffirmation can easily be achieved in the local contemporary Architecture by recognising the necessity of extension spaces such as the veranda or the outdoor kitchen that are used for daily storage and other activities but can also turn into vibrant gathering/bonding space where relatives can meet while preparing for a festival or celebration.

Having elders staying close to the nuclear family cell is an important aspect of the contemporary Mauritian family. They provide much needed support to the family as well as help in the upbringing of grandchildren and impart values while taking care of them after their school hours while their parents are still working. An extended family system and its related house typology may not be applicable anymore, but a contemporary derivative of such houses that retain the important relevant principles and essence of the traditional culture may be of great help to the modern Mauritian society.

Over the years, as people had to build with very little available means while facing drastic changes in construction techniques and with very limited Architectural support, practical solutions such as the use of Jaalis have almost disappeared from our local Architectural scenery. Wooden shutters have had a similar fate. Nowadays, the design of openings has transcended the typical vernacular forms and has acquired a character of its own. There has been the introduction of many types of atypical openings in the Contemporary local houses such as corner windows, full glazed facades and slit windows. The security is now tackled by introducing burglar bars, alarm systems, and cameras while privacy aspects are dealt mostly with the use of curtains or blinds to the interior face of the openings. Though shutters and jaalis have mostly been suppressed in the Mauritian Architecture of today, its essence of multi-skin and unique cultural expression that it represented may still be relevant and need to be explored further through in-depth research and creative applications.

Furthermore, the Jaalis and wooden shutters were perfect examples

of simple, passively sustainable, and effective solutions practiced in local houses of Mauritius that may well become applicable as the sustainability consciousness grows.

Overhangs, on the other hand, were successfully adapted and were retained even when construction techniques shifted drastically from timber pitched roofs to concrete flat roofs. Overhangs are now built in several materials, namely metal, timber, and concrete, with a variety of alterations, mix and match, and adaptations, even though the adaptability of Concrete roofs to the Mauritian climate needs to be explored further.

Overhangs also act as façade embellishments and add-on elements that families install to their existing houses when the need was felt or when they saved enough money to implement them. Two major contemporary uses can be deducted from the understanding of overhangs in the Mauritian context. Firstly, as plug-in and flexible elements to houses that are designed in such a way that users can add as complementing architectural elements months or years after they have started living in their houses. Secondly, the essence of overhangs can become an integral part of the Architecture as a fixed response, such as volumetric protrusions and intrusions that have the same protective characteristics as the overhangs but are not read as separate elements from the main volumetric expressions.

Conclusion

There are several opportunities to explore the relevance of the cultural expressions found in the early houses of the Hindu Indo-Mauritians. They were integrally sustainable in many ways and did not rely on academic classifications to prove their sustainability status. They were not expensive to build, maximised usage of space, had inherent climate control systems and presented multi-layered solutions, successfully balancing spiritual, religious, cultural, environmental, as well as the requirements of the individual, the family, and the neighbourhood. However, there have not been many academic studies and analyses of such houses in the past in Mauritius, when it is clear that many ideas and elements hold great importance to History, Culture, Architecture, Environment, Economy, and Society. Mauritius is a diverse society that has been resilient in many adversities and has emerged as a strong tolerant country that celebrates all cultures. Aspects of society that promote unity in diversity must be researched not only for academic purposes but also for application in our contemporary setting. There is much scope for further in-depth studies in not only old Hindu houses but also those of Muslim, Tamil, and Chinese that can provide a base for studies on expressions of syncretism in the Architecture of Mauritius and for identifications of more formal contributions that Architecture has in the Mauritian culture.

Glossary of terms

La Varangue	*Main sitting area of the traditional Indo-Mauritian house, usually open on sides but covered with roof.*
Caste	*Indian social class system*
Vernacular Architecture	*Local building that was not designed but followed traditions, based on trial and error, and used local available materials.*
Vaastu shastra	*Vāstu śāstra – literally "science of architecture"· is a traditional Hindu system of Architecture based on ancient texts that describe principles of design, layout, measurements, ground preparation, space arrangement, and spatial geometry.*
Kalimai	*Early praying places of neighbourhood that were used by many for veneration and other religious and social activities.*
Hanuman Temple	*Introduced much later in Mauritius and commonly called 'Mahavir swami' though the name and function are for Hanuman praying and protection of the house.*
Pooja Ghar	*Personal prayer space found in individual houses depending on people's beliefs*
Sandhya	*Daily prayers done at home.*
Baihtka	*Baithka in Mauritius are referred to as a place in a locality where culture, religion and traditions are taught to children.*
Griha Pravesh	*Hindu religious ritual performed before occupation of a new built house.*
Chaukhat	*Threshold of main entrance door of a house traditionally made in timber.*
Chattai	*Rectangular rattan mats commonly used for sitting on the floor by Indo-Mauritians.*
Chulha	*Traditional Cooking stove made of cow dung, mud, and stone.*
Aangan	*Courtyard or yard of a typical Hindu Indo-Mauritian house.*
Tulsi	*Holy basil plant considered as sacred in the Hindu philosophy.*
Godon	*Semi-room commonly found in Indo-Mauritian houses used for storage of goods and for sleeping.*
Chakki	*Two circular stones placed on top of each other with the top one fitted with a metal rod handle and a hole in the centre where grains were put and crushed by circular movements of the top stone done by manually rotating it by holding the metal rod.*
Roche laver	*Basalt stone used for washing clothes when water became readily available and the practice of clothes washing at riverbanks stopped.*
Roche cari	*Basalt stone for used for making pulps by mixing herbs and spices used in Indian food preparation.*
Karipoule	*Curry tree or sweet neem leaves used in traditional Indian food preparation. The Mauritian name was probably derived from its Tamil name karivēppilai.*
Jaali	*Term for a perforated wall or latticed screen, usually with an ornamental pattern constructed using calligraphy, geometry, or natural patterns.*

Notes

1. In 1870, the mortality rate for the Europeans was 18.4 per thousand; among the creole population 66.6 per thousand; among the Indians no less than 158.6 per thousand. Holmberg, L. (1962)

2. Many Indians left Mauritius and returned home as soon as their contracts allowed. Up to 1924, when immigration had practically ceased, the total number of Indians brought to Mauritius was 453,036, but 169,692 of these had left the island again. Holmberg, L. (1962)

3. Cow dung mixed with mud was commonly used as floor and wall finishes. It is believed that the properties of cow dung are good for insulation, have health benefits, are an insect repellent, and are believed to emit positive energies for spirituality.

4. The influence of the British and French Architecture (termed as Colonial in this article) was already present on the Island and served as a heavy influence, reference, and greatly guided the available craftsmanship on the island at that time.

5. House types and sizes were determined by the economic status of the families. Families with a high economic status constructed houses made of stone and corrugated sheets, while those with a low economic status built houses from bamboo and hay, covered with a mixture of cow dung and red soil.

5. The social organisation system has been perpetuated for thousands of years.

6. It is true that the *baithka* was the nerve centre of the community in the old days. It was in the *baithka* that they would teach their children the vernacular and inculcate religious and moral values. (Boodhoo S, 2010).

7. Traditional food from various cultures appropriated in Mauritius by all and representative of the diverse culture of the country.

8. An in-between space is referred to here as a space that is neither inside nor outside. It occurred accidentally under overhangs or roof protrusions specially kept for such activities.

9. Mauritius is frequently visited by cyclones during summer.

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Received: 08th Jan 2025 **Revised:** 30th Mar 2025 **Accepted:** 25th April 2025