



MINISTER FOR MULTI ETHNIC AFFAIRS AND SUGAR INDUSTRY

Hon. Charan Jeath Singh

Speech - On the occasion of 145th Celebration of Commemoration
Girmit Day

12th May 2024 at 7.45 hrs

- **Minister for Lands and Mineral Resource, Hon. Filimoni Vosarogo**
 - **Chairperson of the 145th Girmit Organising Committee**
 - **Our Religious Leaders and Chairman of Girmit Council, Mr. Selwa Nandan**
 - **Distinguished Delegates, School Students,**
 - **Ladies and Gentlemen,**
 - **And those watching the program through the digital platform in Fiji and abroad,**
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Namaste!

1. Welcome to the second day of festivities for the 2024 Girmit commemoration. I am sure you all are enjoying the

beautiful atmosphere of the Girmit Mela with food, music, entertainment and various exhibitions.

2. Today also marks another important day on our calendar for all mothers and I wish you a happy Mothers' Day. You are our strength, inspiration and hope.
3. At this juncture, let me first acknowledge the dedication and commitment given by the 2024 Girmit Organising Committee in planning and executing this years' National celebration in Lautoka. In saying this, I am very appreciative of the Chairperson of the 2024 Girmit Committee, Hon. Sashi Kiran - Assistant Minister for Women, Children and Social Protection - for her leadership in preparations towards leading up to this event. I also pay tribute to the Lautoka Girmit Working Committee led by Mr. Selwa Nandan for his contribution towards this event. I know a lot of effort has been put up by all of you to ensure that everything was in order for the event to commence. I am really proud of all your time, commitment and efforts.

4. Girit Commemoration has a lot of significance. It is the time to remember and commemorate the sufferings that our forefathers went through, a time to reflect on the past, ensuring that their struggles and sacrifices are not forgotten. It is more a collection of memories for some and for others on the other hand, Girit commemoration is a time to move on from the past and think of the future. For them, Girit is part of their lives and they will keep it a moment in history, and march on to achieve greater heights and make a name for them, their family members and the beloved nation, Fiji as we see how almost all have done.
5. I believe that the best way to commemorate Girit is to recollect its significance, and how it has allowed us to contribute to our personal and professional growth and to the development of our beloved nation.
6. One of the most significant contributions of the Giritiyas and their descendants is in the Agriculture Sector, in particular the Sugar Industry. They had a central role in establishing and expanding sugarcane plantations in Fiji, which became a major economic activity for the country

since their arrival in 1879. The labor-intensive cultivation and processing of sugarcane provided employment opportunities and contributed significantly to Fiji's economy in terms of our foreign revenue.

7. Despite its many challenges in recent years, the sugar industry still remains a major contributor to the Fiji's economy. Sugar industry and the life of a Girmitya is inseparable. The Coalition Government under the leadership of our Prime Minister has given me the responsibility to take the sugar industry to new heights. We are taking many new initiatives to ensure that the sugar industry is modernized to meet and match the demands of this era.

8. Apart from sugar industry, the Girit descendants also diversified the agricultural sector. They introduced and cultivated various crops such as rice, vegetables, fruits, and spices, contributing to the country's food security and agricultural diversity.

9. The descendants of Girmityas have continued to be an integral part of Fiji's agricultural labor force. Their hard

work and dedication on sustaining the agricultural production in various regions of Fiji, has contributed to the overall development of the sector.

10. While the Indians were brought largely to cultivate sugarcane plantations, their zest for education never faded away. When they arrived in Fiji, many of them brought with them a strong emphasis on education and a desire for their children to receive schooling. This was a realization after the hardship of Girit.

11. Education was regarded as a means of liberating their posterity from the legacies of Girit. Despite facing numerous challenges, including language barriers and socio-economic hardships, the Giritiyas prioritized education for their children. They established informal schools within their communities, often under trees or in makeshift structures, where basic literacy and numeracy skills were taught. Over time, as the Indian community in Fiji grew and established itself more firmly, they began to advocate for formal education opportunities. This led to the establishment of primary schools and secondary schools. Today there are many prominent schools run by

the Girmitya descendants that were created during that time, including those which are led by Sanatan Dharam, TISI Sangam, Arya Samaj, Fiji Muslim League, Sikh Association of Fiji, to name a few.

12. Furthermore, many descendants of the Girmityas have excelled in education, becoming teachers, academics, and professionals in various fields. For instance, our own late Professor Brij Lal, is a well renowned historian, whose family was allowed by the Coalition Government to bring his ashes after his demise in December 2021. Professor Lal became the finest historian Fiji has ever produced, a world leader in Pacific history, and also in studies of the Fijians of Indian Descendant diaspora. He published 58 books in his career as a sole author and edited. This is a remarkable achievement indeed, which we all are very proud of.
13. It is imperative to say that Girmitya descendant's commitment to education has had a lasting impact on Fiji, contributing to the intellectual and socio-economic development of the nation.

14. Let me also convey my appreciation to the Government of India for its contribution through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and Swami Vivekanand Cultural Centre for its enormous support to our people. Your teachings of music, dance, art, culture since 1972 has enormously been a pillar to maintain the traditions and values of our heritage.
15. Let me make some reflection on the journey beyond the Girmit era. The Contribution of the Girmit Descendants in the commerce sector is admirable and commendable. It is a fact that majority in the business sector in Fiji, from small to medium or even the big businesses, are owned by the descendants of the Girmityas.
- 16.** Today, Fiji is proud to have some prominent businesses, not only in Fiji but spread across the Pacific. Some notable names which we all know include the Hotel Group, the Chain of Supermarkets, Manufacturing Companies, Hardware Companies, Construction Companies, Food Processing Companies, and many others, in almost all sectors of our economy. And these successes are a true and direct reflection on this year's theme; **“A**

Journey of Girit Descendants in Building a New Fiji”.

17. The Girit Descendants have contributed in many ways in the development of Fiji and will continue to contribute Fiji's to development.
18. Given the fact that the Girit Descendants have contributed tremendously to prosperity of Fiji, their unwavering commitment to inclusiveness and adoptability to multiracialism and multiculturalism cannot go unrecognised. They symbolise people who are more than willing to unite and take Fiji to greater heights as they have done since 1879.
19. This is where my Ministry, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs will assist the descendants of the Giritiyas and those that belong to other minority groups, to build social-cohesion amongst all our communities.
20. Allow me to read the Presidents message on 4th March while opening the Parliament, and I quote;

“The Coalition Government is committed to protect and preserve our traditions, cultures and languages to promote social cohesion among our people. To accomplish this, the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs will launch a new policy framework that will enhance social cohesion among all ethnic communities through sound policies, consultations and inclusiveness”, unquote.

21. As the Minister responsible for Multi-Ethnic Affairs, I applaud His Excellency for emphasizing on the importance of promoting social cohesion. I also thank the Coalition Government for re-establishing the Ministry of Multi-Ethnic Affairs which was disbanded more than a decade ago.

22. I agree with His Excellency and I also believe in promoting Fiji where culturally diverse societies are socially-cohesive and all citizens share and agree on a common direction of a nation. We all will do better economically and socially and will be more successful at attending to challenges as it arises.

23. We must have a sense of belonging, where trust and respect permeate through our communities, and where the richness of our cultures are celebrated and embraced. With a renewed focus on bridging the gap between different ethnic groups and promoting understanding and acceptance, we aim to pave the way for a more harmonious and prosperous society.
24. In conclusion, I wish to state that as descendants of the Girmityas we have contributed a lot to this beloved nation. And in return, the Fiji has also given us many opportunities to prove ourselves to succeed in so many fields.
25. On the occasion of Girmity commemoration tonight, keeping line with the theme - ***Journey of Girmity Descendants in Building a New Fiji*** - as descendent of Girmityas, we offer our commitment to this nation with open arms and I am sure all of you have the same commitment and vision. I wish you all the best for the rest of the program tonight.

Dhanyavaad,

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