

Indian Diaspora in Mauritius Nation Building

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Abstract:

Mauritius is a beautiful island Country of African continent covered with plateaus, Mountains, Valleys, rivers, waterfalls and coral reefs, located at 57°18'-57°46' longitude east and 19°50'-20°32' latitude south about 28 miles from east to west, 38 mile from north to south, 100 miles long coastline and total area 720 square miles. Mauritians is 1500 miles from mainland of Africa and 2684 miles from Mumbai (India). Due to the coastal climate here, two seasons are found - hot cold (May – October), and hot summer (November- April)¹.

The history of human settlement in Mauritius is about 400 years old (16th C.AD), before this it was a uninhabited island, although according to literary sources, people were familiar with this island², even before this (arrival of Arabs in 7th C. AD, marking of names of African countries in a map by Arab geographer Idris in 1153 AD, many historians claim that it was discovered by Arab traders in 1507 AD for the first time etc.) it was covered with thick ebony and dense date palm forest, Later, Mauritius was a European Colony till 1968, in liberating which the Indian expatriates played a major role.

Key Words: Indentured labour (Girmitiyas), Dodo, Creole, migrants.

1. Haribansh, Mauritius Yatra ke Anubhaw pahli kadi: peeda se purusherth tak, series 13, April,2016.
2. Samyol, Sanjeev, Mantham ka sagar ekka Yatra, publisher Chennai, 2018, pg17

ERA OF COLONISATION:

The discovery of India by Portuguese explorer Vasco-De-Gama opened the doors of the Indian ocean for the Europeans. The Portuguese wanted to establish their own rule in the Indian ocean by ending the supremacy of the Arabs. In this sequence, While searching for alternative routes, Mauritius was discovered in the first decade of 16th C. AD. A Trading fleet of Goa governor Albuquerque named “Santa Maria De Sara” whose captain were Domingo Fernandes visited this island and hence it was named Domingo Fernandes³. During this period, since this island was not important from a commercial point of view, it was used to escape/ attack pirates, repair ships etc. In this way, the Portuguese sailors kept it under their control for about a century, which also affected the natural environment here, like many plants and animals were brought and left here, many birds (Dodo) also became extinct etc.

The Dutch arrived on this island in 1598 and named it Mauritius on the name of Dutch prince Maurice of Nassau.⁴ In 1638, the Dutch developed a colony here and exported ebony and teak wood to Europe and brought sugarcane from Java to this island to make it suitable for sugarcane cultivation. Due to several reasons (making Brazil as a new colony, not getting the expected success in agriculture) the Dutch left Mauritius in 1710. From 1775-1810 AD, France had control over this island and during this period, it was renamed as “Isle de France” (Island of France) and developed it rapidly.⁵

3. Singh k Hajari, History of Indians in Mauritius, Macmillan, New Delhi, 1975, pg-25

4. Prasad, Dharmendra, pearl of Indian ocean, pustakanyan publication, 1992, pg- 16-17

5. Chattopadhyay, Anjana, Mauritius today, New Delhi khama publication, 1993, pg. 5

In Mauritius the French governor “Mahe de Labourdane (1735-1745 AD) imported slaves and labourers from Chandranagar (Bengal)⁶ Which included many craftsmen (masons, Carpenters black smith etc.), who contributed is the development of Mauritius from other regions of India.

Due to the good character of Indian craftsmen (labourers) governor Labourdane thought of setting them in Mauritius and

sent other labourers from India here as well, later these labourers adopted European culture and developed a mixed culture. Most of these labourers were employed in agriculture related works (Tobacco, Indigo, Sugarcane). In 1764, the administration of Mauritius came in the hand of the French Emperor.⁷ During the French revolution of 1789 AD the revolutionaries of Mauritius took the administration of the island in their own hands and broke relations with France from 1798-1803 AD and started running the administration like an independent country. When Napoleon general Decaun as the Captain General of the French colony in India, the British did not allow him to land on the coast of Pondichery and hence he was sent to Mauritius and made the governor there. Decaun brought about many administrative reforms in Mauritius. The British captured Seychelles (1804 AD), cape of good hope and Rodrigues (1809AD) and closed all routes of Mauritius⁸, in which Indian soldiers (out of a total of 16, 000 soldiers, 9000 were Indians) supported the British.

6. Indradeo Bholenath, Maritius me hamare purvaj aur unki sanskritik virasat, Hindi book centre, 2015, pg-20

7. Ramsharan prahalad, History of Mauritius, vani publication, 2004 pg-15

8. Prasad, Dharmendra, 1992, ex ibid, pg-30

Finally, after the British gained full control over Mauritius, the first British Governor Fakhar declared that the language, culture and religion of all the people of the island would be protected and everyone could do business here and slave trade will be abolished (by the British parliament in 1807).⁹

Due to the complexity of the slave system of Mauritius, the Slavery Abolition Act, 1833 was implemented on 1st February 1835. To avoid the labor crisis, apprenticeship was given for a period of 6 years, in which the slaves had to work for their previous masters, although due to opposition, it has to be ended two years before the time limit. Due to this, a new system of conditional labor was started to overcome the shortage of workers in the fields faced by the European capitalists of Mauritius, in which laborers from India were sent to the British colonies (Mauritius, Fiji, Surinam etc.) for Agriculture at cheap rates.

INDIAN IMMIGRATION

Under the conditional system, (Indentured Labour) for the first time on 2 November, 1834, 36 workers were brought from the villages of Chhotanagpur division of Jharkhand by James Arbuthnant, a representative of Hunter Arbuthnant Company, and sent to Mauritius from the port of Calcutta.¹⁰ Later, it gained momentum and a large number of Indian workers were sent to Mauritius, who used to travel by Cargo ships going to Mauritius.

9. Mishra, amit kumar, Mauritius, NVT, Delhi, 2015 pg-15

10 Ramsharan prahalad, 2004, ex ibid, pg61

Later, when the labour recruitment law was passed, they started being sent by passenger ships. Later, workers from Patna, Calcutta and Madras and traders from Punjab and Gujarat also settled there.¹¹

IMMIGRATION RECRUITMENT PROCESS AND CONDITIONS:

There were three immigration agents in Calcutta to send the workers and all of them also had their own depots (stay for workers before or after their journey). Initially, workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (mainly Purvanchal region) used to go to Calcutta in large numbers for employment, from where they were sent to European colonies, later workers were also taken from other areas of India.¹² The workers had to go through many procedures before going to Mauritius, such as getting a permit from the Immigration Protector Office (Calcutta), countersignature of the Deputy Commissioner (Concerned district), reading out the agreement, name of the colony, medical examination and signing or thumb impression on the agreement in front of a magistrate.¹³

However, most of the times these conditions were not fulfilled and the workers were given false assurances and incorrect information.

Many conditions were also fixed for immigration, such as working in Mauritius for 5 years, both ways travel expenses to be borne by the employer, 6 months advance salary, salary for men would be Rs. 5 per month and for women Rs. 4 per month, providing sufficient ration for food daily and giving one dhoti, one shirt, two blankets, two caps and one jacket every year.¹⁴

¹¹ Prasad Dharmendra, trerl of Indian Occasion 1992 page 35.

¹² Ramsaran Prahalad, Mauritium Adikal Kanchan, Atmaram and sons, 1997, page 49

¹⁴ Saha panchanan, immigration of Indian labour (1834-1900), pupils publication house, 1970 pg-6

STATUS OF WORKERS:

The workers had to face many problems right from the beginning of the journey. After suffering unbearable hardships in the ship, they were sent to work in the fields immediately after reaching there and the plantation owners behaved very badly towards them. Despite hard work, the remuneration was very low, which was monthly and daily. The workers who got monthly wages were also given some free facilities, such as 24 sher (kg.) rice, 2-4 sher (kg.) pulses, 1-2 sher oil, salt, lamp and oil for working till late night, in a week.¹⁵ In Case of illness or not coming to work, their wages of two days were deducted (double cut), paying fine due to minor mistakes and deducting some part from the salary in the name of return ticket etc.¹⁶ The workers describe such atrocities through folk songs:

“Sonawa khatir ailo rama, ahi re mirich desh.....”

Sonawa jaisan gali gaile sonawan sarir.....”

(Rama, I have come for gold in this country of mirich, the golden body has been melted like gold)

The allowance of daily wage workers was determined on the basis of their working capacity and time. A part from working in sugarcane farming, these workers also worked in sugarcane mills, government public works and construction work. Their women and children also did domestic work.³⁷

Between 1834-1870 AD, 3.12 Lac workers from India reached Mauritius, while only 1.09 lac returned to India.¹⁸ According to the census of 1871 AD two-thirds of the total population of Mauritius were Indians. Later, immigrants from China and Malagasy were also brought to Mauritius.

Due to the agitation by the local people against the conditional system, the Mauritius government formed a commission under the chairmanship of Aderson in 1838 to investigate the condition of the workers. In its report, many things were revealed, such as the houses of the workers are narrow and dirty, and 8-9% workers die from disease, more labour than the prescribed time (15-15 hours per day) was made A certain proportion of women was necessary in the immigration and the owners were also indifferent towards the workers. Mauritius governor Nicolay made many rules for the welfare of the workers. Such as government permit necessary to take them to Mauritius, facility to send them back after the expiry of the period, proper wages, food, housing and medical facilities.¹⁹ Due to this report, the Government of India banned immigration from 1839-1842 and this issue was also raised in the British parliament. Due to the demand of the Government of India to make security rules, the Mauritius Government included the provision of appointment of “Overseas Protector”²⁰ for the safety of immigrant workers and provision of return ticket to the workers at the time of recruitment. Rule 56 of the Indian immigration Act, 1871 made it mandatory that under the immigration Policy in all colonial states, 40% of the immigrants would be female as compared to male.²¹

18 Mukherjee, S.B. the indenture stem in Mauritius 1837-1915, Phirme : K. L. Musehotpadyay, 1962, page 14

19 Proceedings 1882 (No. 22-26) revenue and agriculture department immigration branch, National archive page,

20 Proceedings Feb., 1883 (No. 124-188), same, page-10

21 Semes, Adele smit, Modern Mauritius the propertis of decalmsation, blaningation, Indian university, page 37

According to the ordinance of 1878, 50% of the immigrants in Mauritius would be female.

The contribution of Indians in the agriculture sector of Mauritius ushered in a golden era.²² Before the arrival of Indian immigrants, sugarcane was cultivated in 10, 108 acres of Mauritius, which increased to 165, 957 acres by 1925. Sugarcane cultivation was the backbone of Mauritius economy because the climate here was favorable for sugarcane cultivation, so sugarcane crop was sown three times a year. By 1918, Mauritius’s sugar trade had become recognized globally.²³ Other industries are also linked to the sugarcane industry such as wine, silk production, etc.

According to the law made in 1865, free migrant workers were given a permit with a photograph for employment, for which two pounds were charged from the workers. The workers had to keep the permit tied on their arms, in case of not tying it they had to pay a fine of two pounds of two weeks in jail, scholars and social workers of India and other countries,²⁴ prominent among them being Remi Oleye of Mauritius and Delevitz of Germany raised their voice from time to time against the conditional practice (indentured labour) due to which some steps were taken from time to time for the welfare of the workers.

22 Singh K. Hajari, same, 1975, page 54

23 Prasad Dharmender, 1992, exhibid page 58

24 Ramesh Prahalad, 2004, ex ibid, page 89

15 Singh Kumar Maharaj, Mauritiums (Report) page 17

16 Ramsharan prahalad, 1997, ex,ibid, pg 49

17 Mukherjee, s.b., the endenturi system in Mauritius 1837-1915 pharma, 1962 pg 14

TERMINATION OF CONDITIONAL PRACTICE: (INDENTURED LABOURS)

Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha in South Africa was also discussed in other colonial countries. Through Thambi Naidu, Gandhi came to know about the condition of workers in Mauritius. In 1901, Gandhiji reached port Louis while returning to India from South Africa by a ship named Naxera and stayed at Ahmed Ghulam Mahammad's place.²⁶ On the birth anniversary of British Emperor Edward VII,⁴ Mauritius governor Charles Bruce hosted a dinner for Gandhi. Gandhi also met the members of the Bar Council of the Supreme Court and Muslim and Tamil businessmen. Gandhi's visit inspired Indian immigrants to actively participate in cultural renaissance, mass movements and democratic politics. In 1901, Gandhi mentioned the Plight of immigrant workers in the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress and after some time, Gandhi sent his friend Mani Lal Magan Lal (Barrister of Baroda) to Mauritius to help the immigrants (1907), Who made a lot of efforts for the all-round development of workers during his four year service in Mauritius. In the 1920s. Indian freedom fighters (Gandhi, Malaviya, Tej Bahadur Sapru etc.) demanded a ban on the immigration of Indian workers, with which the then Viceroy Lord Harding also agreed.²⁷ As a result, the Government of India appointed Kunwar Maharaj Singh to review the immigration of workers, who reached Mauritius on 19 December, 1924, whose investigation report was published by the Government of India in August 1925.

These recommendation,, suggested abolition of the conditional system (Girmitiya) along with the establishment of welfare state with many provisions for the economic, social and Cultural development of the workers. Ultimately, on the recommendation of Lord Harding, the Home Ministry in 1920 and the British Parliament also made a law to end this system.

SOCIETY AND CULTURE:

Mauritius does not have its own indigenous culture but is a confluence of many cultures – European, African (slaves), Chinese and Indian (Indentured labourers). According to the 2022 census (Statistics Mauritius), 47.87% of the total population of Mauritius is Hindu, 32.29% Christian, 18.24% Islam and 0.7% Buddhist (Chinese origin). Indian Immigrant labourers and some traders settled in Mauritius in large numbers, which included Hindus, Muslims, some Christians and Buddhists, who came of different regions of India such as Calcutta, Chennai and Bombay ports. They also brought with them their religious (Philosophy, moral values), Cultural (folk songs, language, tradition) and spiritual heritage.²⁸ Indian labourers also brought with them texts related to Ram Charitra Manas, Hanuman Chalisa, Geeta and Alha-Udal in their boundles, which helped them in boosting their self confidence during the days of their struggle. Despite the opposition of the British, Indians living in Mauritius used to call Indian religious gurus for worship (havan).²⁹

28 Singh, Dhananjaya, purebiyaon ka work vist via. Dash Paradesh, Raj names Publication, N. Delhi, 2020, page 20

29 Ganga Upadhy freedom fighter of Meniruitus pg23

The first temple in Mauritius was built in Gokul in 1867 AD and till now many Hindu temples and places have been built in different areas of Mauritius, the famous of which are Maheshwarnath Temple (Triolet Shivala), Ganga Talab (volcanic lake) etc. The main festivals of Mauritius are Mahashivrati, Deepawali, are Holi, Moharram, Dragon Festival etc.

HINDI, BHOJPURI AND FOLK LITERATURE LANGUAGE:

Due to the migration of Bhojpuri speaking labourers from Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh in large numbers, the Hindi language has become developed through the Bhojpuri dialect.³¹ Hindi was promoted in Mauritius through Magazines, Meetings (Baithaka) institution (Hindi Pracharini Sabha, Arya Samaj etc), Hindi cinema, artists, musicians, television programmes, debate competitions.³² Chan poets and officially Hindi was taught in Mauritius schools from March 1954. Bhojpuri is taught in some schools, which has assimilated words from Creole dialect (French and Bhojpuri) over time, meetings also played an important role in the development of Bhojpuri, where people used to gather in the evening and recite Ramayana and other stories, talk about happiness and sorrow, etc. Indian diaspora made folk literature more vocal in Mauritius, which included stories (Raja-Rani, Pari, Panchatantra stories). short dialogues and songs/folk songs (of all the rituals of marriage, etc.)³³

30 Jain Yaspal, Gagan Anchal (magazine) Mauriur, series 4, 1985, page 46

26 Mittal, Jitendra Kumar, Mauritium Rajpal amd Sons Delhi, 1007, page 19

27 Ramsharan prahalad,2004, exhibid, pg89

31 Pankaj Kumar, Coolie lines name Publication New Delhi, 2018, Page 69

32 Kushwaha Rajinder Singh, Prehaled Ramsh sathiya Marmagya even its harvest, sterling publiccation New Delhi, page 55

33 Indradev Bholanath, 2015 same page 70

DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS:

Due to low level of education, being considered an outsider by the local people and being prevented from participating in political activities, the Indian community remained isolated from Mauritius society and politics in the initial days. Gandhiji's arrival in Mauritius in 1901 and Manilal's arrival in 1907 aroused political consciousness among the expatriate Indians. Encouraged by the formation of the Indian National Congress, they started participating in politics in the 1920s. Initially, the educated intellectuals participated in politics. In 1935, to celebrate the centenary of the Indian community in Mauritius, the "Indian Cultural Association" was formed, in which Ram Prasad Niranjani³⁴ (a young lawyer) and Seewoosagur Ramgoolam (who became the first Prime Minister of Mauritius) were also participated. Seewoosagur Ramgoolam was from a rural background and had studied of Doctor in England. After returning to Mauritius from England in 1934, he built an image of successful doctor and an able leader and later became famous in Mauritius as 'Chacha'.

Later, other Indians also contributed to the independence movement of Mauritius, among whom Vasudev Vishnu Dayal and Atmaram Vishwanam were prominent.

Finally, Mauritius got independence in 1968 and Seewoosagur Ramgoolam was appointed as the first Prime Minister. His ancestors belonged to the Purvanchal region of India (Eastern U.P. and Western Bihar).

34 Rameshwaram Prahaled Maritius entening in Indian aspect. Pg-85

He was so impressed by Gandhiji that he declared that date of independence of Mauritius as 12 March, 1968 (Gandhiji had started the Dandi March on 12 Marth, 1931). Later, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam received the status of the "father of the Nation of Mauritius."³⁵

The contribution of the Indian diaspora in building the golden history of Mauritius has been commendable. Their contribution is visible in the development of Mauritius even today. In the political history of Mauritius, Since the country became independent, only Hindus of Indian origin (Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, Anirudh Jagganath, Navin Ramgoolam, Pravind Jagganath) have been elected as the prime Minister of Mauritius. Only as an exception, a Christian of French-Mauritian origin Paul Verenger (03 September, 2003 - 5 July, 2005) became the prime Minister for a short tenure.³⁶

Prasad Dharmnder, 1992, exhibid page 22

35. Samens, Adele smith, 1982, exhibid pg- 82

36. <http://www.Muritius.wikipedia>

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