Preface

Mauritius is a multi-ethnic society. It is composed of four ethnic groups; Indians Hindu (52 %), Muslim (16 %), Creoles of African ancestry (28 %), the Chinese (3 %) and the Franco-Mauritian of European ancestry (1 %). The People of Indian Origin (PIOs) were brought to the island during French rule as artisans, plumbers, domestic help and slaves and later on under British rule as indentured labour. The PIOs immigration into Mauritius continued on and off with varying degree of governmental control. The influx of PIOs brought a radical change in the composition of the Mauritian population. In 1835, the PIO constituted only a minute proportion of the population; ten year later one third of the population PIOs and fifteen years after that, in 1861, two third of the population PIO. This proportion continues till today.

The indentured labourers lived under pathetic conditions. The early immigrants were housed in estate quarters. The estate housing was unsatisfactory with cramped quarters, inadequate ventilation and lack of privacy, poor sanitation, insufficient water and ill-equipped hospitals. As the PIOs population stabilized, a new generation of Mauritian born PIOs emerged. By 1898, Mauritian-born PIOs outnumbered those born in India. The economically successful segment began to educate their children. The economic rise of the PIOs has been a gradual process taking the better part of the century. In the early days of immigration little thought was given to involve PIOS in the political life of the island. There was even uncertainty as to whether they would become permanent residents, The provision of free return passages and the time limit of the labour contract were based on the assumption that the migrants would return to India. On the other hand there were
advocates of permanent PIOs settlement in Mauritius, as shown by the various propositions to establish PIOs villages and the provisions encouraging PIOs to bring their wives.

As the PIOs population emerged as the dominant demographic force by 1861, concern grew in a few quarters as to the political future of Mauritius. The constitution granted to Mauritius in 1886 provided for restricted franchise. It was only open to the male British subjects with a minimum of three years residence in Mauritius and owning property with a minimum value of Rs 3,000 or tenancy receipt with a monthly rent of Rs 25, or a businessman paying a License fee of Rs 2,000. In the election held in 1886, there were only 4,000 qualified voters. Though certain relaxations were made subsequently, yet in 1909, the electorate consisted of merely 2% of the adult population. This restricted franchise operated effectively against the elections of members of the PIOs community who were by then the majority community of the island.

After a prolonged agitation by the Creoles and PIOs a new constitution was introduced in 1948, which removed income and property qualifications and franchise was extended to both sexes with limited literacy qualification. Under the new constitution any individual who could speak, read and write any one of the languages spoken in Mauritius was entitled to the right to vote. It resulted in a six-fold increase in the numbers of registered voters. The extension of franchise had its consequences on the politics of Mauritius. It brought to the surface the issue of ethnicity, which had hitherto remained dormant in Mauritius. As PIOs were in the majority the extension of franchise proved beneficial to them. It not only overthrew electoral dominance of the Franco-Mauritians but also made the ethnic groups like the Creole elites apprehensive about their privileged position.
The period from 1947-67 witnessed the emergence of many political groups and parties. An era of responsible and representative government began. New developments occurred on the political scene. Among these, the most significant development was the acquisition of power by the Indo-Mauritians, which caused a radical change in the power equation. The liberalising effects of the World War, the Return of the labour Party in Britain, and the independence of India created a favourable external environment for the political and constitutional advancement of Mauritius. Internally, the Labour Party, the socio-cultural movement of the Bissoondoyal and the agitations and activities of the trade unions pressed for a more representative government. In the socio-economic sphere, the PIOs had already created a niche for themselves; what they lacked was political representation which could have reflected their socio-economic importance in the country which had till then been denied to the community.

Under the new constitution of 1948, the legislative council had a majority of the elected members. It consisted of three ex officio members, 12 nominated and 19 members elected from five constituencies. Thus, the 1948 elections started intense political activity. The Labour Party represented Creoles, Hindus and Muslims. The elections were more a popularity contest with most of the 104 contending individuals standing as independent candidates. In ethnic terms, PIO swept the polls by winning 11 of the 19 seats from five constituencies. It was from here that the era of coalitions and cooperation politics started. This continued up to 1967. Different groups contested all the subsequent elections on different issues, but at the time of the formation of the government all groups of PIOs entered into a coalition to form the government.
The PIOs acquired political power after independence. The new government after independence tried to accommodate all interest groups to balance the ethnic representation. Under the new constitution private property, fundamental rights, freedom of expression and association were protected and protection from discrimination on the basis of race, colour, caste, creed or sex became a constitutional right. During those days society was divided along many lines. PIOs contributed to maintain political stability, managed acute social conflict and evolved the practices of a vibrant democracy.

The PIO in Mauritius have showed a unique tendency of assertion as well as assimilation into Mauritian society during the last thirty years of the post Colonial phase. They asserted their ethnic identity in certain spheres, like in the Political domain. At the same time, they have tried to assimilate themselves within Mauritian society to give a national identity to the population of Mauritius. This can be seen through certain indicators. The earlier generation of PIO’s was conservative about many aspects of their culture to a great extent and used to converse in their mother tongue. However, the new generation of PIOs have slowly adopted Creole as lingua franca. All of them read and write in French. The French language was adopted not only by the Creoles and other minorities but also by PIOs. All daily and weekly newspapers in the Mauritius are in French language. There is only one weekly newspaper in English. This kind of rapid development of linguistic assimilation is bringing a broader homogeneity in Mauritian society. Similarly Indian movies and Indian songs are very popular along with the French programme. All linguistic groups in Mauritius enjoy both Hindi and French programmes. The process of assimilation into Mauritian society is visible in their
changing foods habits as well. The PIOs have slowly acquired a liking for French cuisine. The PIOs usually wear jeans, skirts and other Western dresses.

The common work place, education and public office has enabled people of different ethnic origins to come closer. The constant interaction with each other has brought about a better understanding among the PIOs and other ethnic minorities of Mauritius.

However, the PIOs assert their separate ethnic identity and use it to their benefit during the elections. This phenomenon exists primarily to maintain the political dominance of the PIOs in Mauritius. However they have not resisted assimilation in many other areas.

It can be observed that in an acutely divided society there are also homogenizing trends. While PIOs were assimilated with other cultures in some areas, at the same time Indian movies and music also influenced other cultures. This has developed into a unique Mauritian culture bearing the influences of various ethnic groups.

In the proposed research an effort has been made to make a comprehensive study of the entire process of political assertion, the factors which led to the assertion of PIO in Mauritius and the process though which they maintain their hold in Mauritius. The proposed study would also try to discover how PIOs managed their political dominance in the pluralist society of Mauritius where as in other similar colonies they failed.

The aim of this study is to analyse and understand the political assertion processes of PIOs in Mauritius. The focus is to understand how the social and economic sector responded to PIO assertion. How have PIOs faced problems of economic reform, social conflict and political challenges? More importantly, how have PIOs
managed the crises that emerged due to different ethnic group demands? What would be the future challenges and threats for PIOs political supremacy?

The perspective is to understand the uniqueness of the Mauritian model in which political assertion of the majority ethnic groups through democratic norms is possible and ethnic groups are maintaining a stable government for the last thirty-five years.

The first chapter describes the theoretical aspect to understand political assertion and ascendancy in a multi-ethnic society. The second chapter describes and analyses the historical background of PIOs settlement in Mauritius, which has shaped the assertion of PIOs in Mauritian social, economic and political spheres.

The political and administrative assertion processes of PIO during 1948 to 1968 have been dealt in chapter three. This chapter describes the growth of PIOs in political and administrative areas, which decide the position of ethnic groups in independent Mauritius.

The fourth chapter takes up issue of economic and social assertion of PIO for which they faced challenges from other ethnic groups. The effect of political assertion on the economic and social sector of the country forms the theme of the fourth chapter.

The fifth chapter examines the future challenges and threats to the PIO political supremacy. It also brings out how the inspiration of PIOs sub groups on a linguistic and cultural basis emerging as a future challenge for PIOs political supremacy. The final chapter carrier concluding remarks of the whole work.
There being not a single research based academic work on the political assertion of PIO in Mauritius, this study suffers from lack of secondary sources. It needed extensive references of newspaper and periodicals. However, due to financial constraints this could not be carried out to the full extent, though the periodicals, newspapers and government reports were consulted during a short visit to the island. This study is also based on intensive personal interviews. That the people of Mauritius are well informed and willing to talk politics, also proved immensely helpful.

I am highly indebted to Dr Ajay Kumar Dubey, my supervisor, without whose active guidance and cooperation it would have been difficult to complete this work. He has always encouraged me in matters great and small. Moreover, I also thank him for understanding my limitations and the patience he has shown time and again.

I would also like to thanks Dr. S. N. Malakar for his invaluable advice, encouragement and suggestions in writing this thesis.

I am thankful to Prof I.N. Mukerjee, without whose constant support and cooperation it would have been impossible to complete this work. His timely support during the crucial phase of writing can't be expressed in words.

I am obliged to many people in India and Mauritius who helped in my research work. I am thankful to Dr Oudaya Narain Gangoo Narainduth Sookhoo from Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Moka, Mauritius; Prof Vijaya Tulsi; S.J. Reddi; Prof Raj Mathur; Humkum Narain Singh from University of Mauritius; Uttam Bissoondoyal, chairman, Public Service Commission, Mauritius; Dr Kamal
Siddique from Government of Bangladesh; Mr Komives from Institute of Social Studies, the Hague.

I am grateful to Jawaharlal Nehru University for providing me a grant to visit Mauritius. I am grateful to MGI Mahatma Gandhi Institute which provided valuable help that facilitated my research. I am especially thankful the staff of the University of Mauritius libraries, Teen Murti and J.N.U libraries. I am also thankful to the staff members of my division.

As I sit back and reflect I can see the appropriateness of the valuable tips given to me by my friends Messrs Murari, Gogoi, Sunny, Dubey, Rubul, Tusar, Bhaskar, Narendra, Nivedita, Dash, Sudesh and Manish. I would like to thank Shuchi who encouraged me whenever I was down, and took the trouble to see that my thesis reached to a fruitful end.

Gratitude is the memory of the heart and no matter how much I wish it cannot be expressed in words. There are many unmentioned, omitted not because their contribution was less, but due to limitations of space.

I must express my thanks to my parents who were always supportive in my study. My brothers Nikhil, Amulya and Bipul gave valuable support to finish this work.

Though my work was helped by many, I take the total responsibility for all the shortcomings.

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