Chapter – 2

Background of India Immigrant in Mauritius and Social –

Political Systems of PIOs in Mauritius up to 1948

2.0 Introduction

Mauritius is a plural society. One of the strange features of Mauritian society is that it does not have any indigenous population. During the early 18th to early 20th century French, East and West Africans, PIOs and Chinese arrived in successive years, for a variety of reasons. Therefore Mauritius has successively been Dutch (1670-1710), French (1715-1814) and a British (1814-1968) colony. The French influence remains the strongest of the three because of the Anglo-French treaty (1810) under which the conquering power, Britain, had to “respect and preserve” the customs and laws of the people of the island. This is why the planters of French origin dominated public life throughout the British rule. Currently it has 1.1 million inhabitants. It is composed of four ethnic groups; PIOs (Hindu (52 per cent), Muslim (16 per cent), Creoles of African ancestry (28 per cent), the Chinese (3 per cent) and the Franco-Mauritian of European ancestry (1 per cent). Each ethnic group has participated in the economy in its peculiar way and occupied different power position in the society.

People of Indian Origin (PIOs) being predominantly rural constituted most of the labour force on sugar plantations and small peasantry. Before independence efforts were made to confine them to agricultural occupations. They were also exempted, by and large, from compulsory education laws that were applied to other racial groups. It was only during the mid 18th century that the situation somehow had changed. Since education was not enforced legally, PIOs became non-competitive
groups. It was only during the mid 18th century that the situation somehow had changed. Since education was not enforced legally, PIOs became non-competitive in most non-agricultural areas of the economy like professional services. The ownership of land in terms of smallholdings also got transferred to few PIOs. It was only after independence that many of them invested in small businesses. The pattern of discrimination against East Indians in the public and urban private sectors impelled them into the professions, particularly medicine and law especially for those who managed to acquire a secondary education, and for those who could afford higher education at overseas universities. By means of their professional status some of the PIOs could raise their status to middle and upper classes.

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the stages of Indian immigration and the socio-political systems of PIOs in Mauritius up to 1948. Therefore it will look into how the indenture system was harsh on indentured labourers and how PIOs initiated their assertion process in Mauritius. The chapter specifically highlights the assertion of PIOs in Mauritius before 1948, when the election was introduced. It will analyse how the socio-political system determines economic dominance. It will also explore the historical linkages between different ethnic groups, the role of PIOs leaders. An attempt would be made to compare the overall contribution of PIOs in the political economy of Mauritius. This chapter would serve as a background for the analysis of the rest of the chapters as far as process of assertion of PIOs is concerned.

2.1. History of Immigration of PIOs in Mauritius

The Republic of Mauritius lies in the Arabian Ocean 860 Km east of Madagascar between latitudes 19°58' and 20°32'. Following the unsuccessful attempts of colonisation by the Dutch in the 17th century, the uninhabited island of Mauritius
was occupied during the subsequent century for the plantations. Mauritius passed into British control in 1810. The sugar plantations were based on the slaves from the continent of Africa. The French governor Mahe' de Labourdonnais also used “Indian labour and craftsmanship” from French comptoirs in South India. In fact, even before that, the Dutch had introduced PIOs as slaves in Mauritius, probably from what is now the state of Kerala, and a few from Bengal.

The economy of Mauritius was based on the sugar plantations flourishing on the labour of slaves. When the colony came under Britain, voices were raised against the system of slavery. A legislation passed in 1811 made the traffic of slaves a criminal act. The majority of abolitionists welcomed the legislation banning the slave trade: they believed that without the replenishment of supplies, plantation slavery would be unable to survive. The leaders of the anti-slavery movement then decided for the “massive and comprehensive” mobilisation of the entire slave population.

The Mauritian sugar industry fell into a crisis as a result of the emancipation. The slaves were legally freed but in practice remained bonded to their former owners as apprentices for further terms of 4 to 6 years. Slave emancipation jolted the British colonial sugar industry during the period of apprenticeship and after leading to a universal decline in sugar production.

With the almost total slave withdrawal from plantation labour, the sugar industry was severely affected by the labour “crisis”. This happened because by then they had developed the ability to subsist without resources to wage employment on the

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1 Uttam Bissoondayal, Tiger of the Indian Ocean, (Delhi, Times of India, June 29, 1994), p xx1
3 Ibid., p.2.
planted. The colonists argued that the slaves deserted the plantations because they were innately lazy and irrational. However, it can be said that the desertion took place because of the unattractive planters terms, inhuman conditions of labour and because they were able to make a better living elsewhere.

The resettlement of slaves was dependent on the availability of unoccupied land. In colonies such as Jamaica and British Guyana, where population density was low and unused arable land in plentiful supply, the former slaves left the estates to engage in peasant agriculture. In Mauritius, some of the free slaves who were able to save enough money during apprenticeship and thereafter, purchased freehold plots.

The ability of the free slaves to obtain alternative means of livelihood set the reserve price of plantation labour quite high and most planters refused to raise wages or improve the working conditions. They followed a cheap labour strategy to secure an abundant supply of labour at low wages. For this they tried to hinder the formation of an independent black peasantry and to force emancipates back on to the plantations. But this attempt failed. PIOs had already been successfully introduced on the plantations as slave labour. The millions of Indians, who they believed would be induced to labour in the cane fields for a small amount no greater than that awarded to the slave.

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5 Ibid., p.83.
6 North, n. 4, p.85.
7 Ibid., p.85.
8 Hugh Tinker, n.2, p.18.
The planters approached the Indian government for a large and continuous supply of Indian labour. An organised emigration of Indian labour to the British colonies began from Bengal in 1838, under the supervision and direction of the Government of India. The active sympathy of the Government of India to other colonies further accelerated the pace of emigration.

However, the move towards the export of Indian labour under government regulation was provided by the French Indian Ocean Island of Bourbon or Reunion in 1826. The contracts were for 5 years. Meanwhile, a haphazard importation of PIOs into Mauritius was beginning. The first attempt at immigration under governor Coruille (1829) was a failure. In August 1834, the ship Saran arrived at Port Louis with 39 deck passengers who were assigned to sugar planters. By the end of 1838, perhaps more than 25,000 PIOs had been shipped to Mauritius.

The European planters succeeded in inducing the Government of India to permit Indian emigration that involved large expenditure in importing labourers across the seas to distant colonies. Like Mauritius, West Indies and Fiji led the planter to devise a system in which the labourer could be chained to the employers. The one central idea which runs through all stages of Indian emigration has been expressed by Sir Thomas Hyslop as follows, “we want PIOs as indentured labourers but not as force men”.

The time and the circumstances of recruitment and emigration of the contract labour system moulded the character and nature of the indenture system. Sir William Hunder stated that the indenture system was perilously near slavery. And

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10 Ibid., p.5.
11 Tinker, n.2, p.63.
12 C.Kondapi, n.9, p.6.
13 Hugh Tinker, n.2, p.71.
when the system was later questioned in later 19th and early 20th centuries, eminent Indian public figures like G.K.Gokhale, M.D.K Gandhi & C.F Andrew described it as semi slavery.

Indentured labour is also known as ‘contract labour’ and ‘cooler labour’. It was known by various names in various colonies; for example, the contract system was called Girmit in Fiji and the contract labour as Girmititas. The nature of “cooler system” could be understood by the fact that today the term ‘cooler’ is used to describe any overworked and exploited worker.  

The term “Indentured system” refers to a clearly defined contractual relationship whereby a migrant worker signs a contract in his/her country of origin which fixed the duration (as a rule 5 years, but sometimes even less and sometimes more years). It was not possible for an indentured labourer to terminate the contract before expiry and alleged violation of contract rendered the worker liable to prosecution.

On the other hand, the employer was also under a legal obligation to provide fixed wages, free housing, medical attendance and other amenities. Therefore, if the plantation owner failed to honour the contract, the worker was given a chance of enforcing a claim for the few rights granted by that document. However, in practice, none of the legal obligations of the plantation owners were really binding on them and they flouted the rules and norms to reduce the indentured labourers life to semi – slavery. Thus, to all intents and purposes, such contracts remained enslavement, often lasting for a lifetime. Many of the workers died before their contracts had expired; others had to spent their time in prison due a breach of

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15 Kondapi, n.9, p.31.
contract, or in hospital after the expiry of the agreed term. Most of them were made to renew their contracts upon expiry, often under pressure.\textsuperscript{16}

Under the slavery system of Mauritius, from 1838, several infractions were found in respect of the treatment and recruitment in the process of indentured labourers. The majority of the irregularities were, misrepresentation and deceit, incapacity of the coolies to understand the nature of contracts, prevalence of kidnapping and non-fulfilment of contractual obligations by the planters. The gross abuses connected with recruitment and treatment of labourers attracted public attention and the government ultimately suspended emigration in 1839 and put the whole question of emigration before an enquiry commission.

The governor of Mauritius requested the Government of India to lift the ban on the specific ground that even the most ill-disposed planters could be controlled against the exercise of arbitrary or unjust power.\textsuperscript{17} The suspension order was withdrawn in the case of Mauritius in 1842 and in case of other sugars colonies in 1844. The illegal export of the coolies in this period was mainly carried on through Pondicherry.\textsuperscript{18}

The new act for emigration was passed in 1842. This act served mainly to regulate the emigration of the native inhabitants of all territories under the government of East India Company to the island of Mauritius.\textsuperscript{19} During this period, 30,218 men and 4,307 women were to pass through the depots in India – the second highest annual intake during the entire Mauritius indentured emigration.

In 1845, the council of the Mauritian government appointed a committee to report on the causes of the continued demand for labour in the colony despite large-scale

\textsuperscript{16} Potts, n.14, pp.79-80.
\textsuperscript{17} Kondqi,n.9, p.9.
\textsuperscript{18} Tinker, n.2, p.70.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p.75.
immigration. The committee reported that the intense competition to obtain labourers had led to the most mischievous consequences in the employment of Sirdars to produce them, in enticement of men from estates, and in rendering the labourer completely dependent upon the employer. In 1856, post of protector in Mauritius was created by the Act X\textsuperscript{1}X of 1856 to safeguard the interests of the indentured labourers. The years 1858 and 1859 saw emigration at its peak. After the abolition of slavery, the sugar planters of Mauritius, with the aid of the colonial government and its organs, succeeded in consolidating a system of forced labour, based on Indian immigration and the indentured system which established the dominance of the plantation and of sugar monoculture in the colonial economy. The ideological and coercive means employed to stabilise this system was visibly embodied in the labour code of 1867, which stands as a landmark in the history of labour repression under British colonialism.\textsuperscript{20}

The labour code of 1867 represented an attempt to place old immigrants and even the free-passenger PIOs, under the close control and regimentation to which indentured labourers were subjected. In 1872, when voices were raised against the system, there was general complacency in Britain and India. However the royal commission of enquiry was set up in 1873 to investigate the condition of Indian labourers. The reforms recommended by W.E.Frere and V.A Williamson laid the basis for the more humane labour law of 1874, leading to a perceptible improvement in labour conditions. This remained in force until 1922.\textsuperscript{21} However, much of the substance of the labour code of 1867 was left intact. For example, three months jail for desertion, indolence, insult, etc. Moreover, labour combinations were outlawed till 1937 in Mauritius.

\textsuperscript{20} North, n.A, p.114.

\textsuperscript{21} Hazareesingh, \textit{History of Indian in Mauritius}, (Hong Kong, Macmillan, 1975), p.85.
Thus, the system was to continue for another 50 years and was essentially completed by the early 1870's. By then an uneasy balance had been evolved between the Indian government, Whitehall, and the various colonies, in which false empathy was paid to the interests of the Indian coolies.\footnote{Tinker, n.2, p.115.} This ensured that the plantation industry was able to draw upon a pool of cheap labour with the minimum of leverage against the workers.

The emigration of Indian indentured labour, which started in 1834, continued till 1920. In 1909, some 3,000 PIOs out of the total of 450,000 who had come in, had already settled on the island\footnote{Bissoohsdooyal, n.1, p X11.} The law passed in 1916 abolished indentured immigration from India, following the successive motions to the effect by G. K. Gokhale, Pandit M. M. Malaviya and the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi. On 12 March 1917, the Government of India stopped all recruitment for the colonies and finally ended it in 1920.

An interesting point to be noted is that it was Mauritius of all Britain's sugar colonies, which weathered the threat of emancipation most successfully. This success came from the adequate supply of indentured labour from India. Before 1834, Jamaica used to produce twice as much and British Guyana between 7 and 5 per cent more sugar than Mauritius. Twenty years later, the latter island had become Britain's premier producer and production had increased to more than twice that of British Guyanas and nearly 5 times greater than that of Jamaica.\footnote{North, n.14, p.79.}

Mauritius success in getting an uninterrupted supply of labour from India could be attributed to many reasons. It is partially due to the island's favourable geographical location in relation to India. The long standing mercantile
connections with the Indian subcontinent dating back to the 18th century, facilitated labour recruitment and trade between the two. Also the transport costs between the two were considerably lower and the voyage shorter than to the West Indies, giving edge to the Mauritian planter over his Caribbean counterpart in the use of indentured labour. The Indian government also treated the subject of Indian immigration to the colony as a special case. In fact the colonial government described Indian immigration as the sheet anchor of colonial prosperity.

Thus the setting up of the indenture system using Indian indentured emigrants on the one hand meant a tale of economic success for the Mauritian planters, while on the other, the system (described by Hugh Tinkers as "a new system of slavery") was largely a tale of woe for more than 450,000 PIOs who landed in Mauritius.

2.2. The Irregularities on the Plantations and the End of the Indenture System

When the first Indian coolies arrived on the sugar estates of Mauritius, they were marched to their accommodation, which was still called "camp de Noirs", the accommodation earlier given to the slaves. The world of slavery still survived. The plantation was a world apart on its own, subject to the laws or whims of those in charge i.e. the overseers, the manager and the proprietor.

The plantation way of life survived from the 18th to the 20th century with very little change. And in the existing conditions, if the PIOs were to survive as human beings, their survival depended largely on their own powers of resilience. They devised their own pastimes, recreated same semblance of the last PIOs in their festivals and feasts. But it wasn't much. When goaded beyond their apparently infinite endurance and patience, they would try to rebel, but the protest almost

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25 Ibid., p.93.
26 Ibid., p.84.
27 Tinker, n.2, p.177.
always ended in repression. Although the indentured coolie could be held in legal bondage only for a period of a few years the plantation held most of them for life. The only escape was a return to India- worn out and impoverished.

In Mauritius, they were soon put to work after their arrival, whereas during the time of slavery, an interval of 3 to 6 months was generally allowed after the first arrival of an African before he was put to labour. The result of the immediate engagement of PIOs labourers to work was ‘excessive weakness and sickness’.

Thus, the indentured labourers did not undergo the introductory “seasoning” or training. Moreover, they were forced to work the whole day like the earlier slaves the reason being that these indentured coolies were available to the planters only for a limited period, so the owner did not bother to get them properly acclimatised and extracted maximum work from them. The ruthless over working of the PIOs often led to their deaths. There was one special tragic case on record, that of Shawba, who arrived in Mauritius in August 1900 and failed to adjust to the routine of field labour. He died in prison early in 1903 (held for vagrancy).

The terms and conditions mentioned in the contract and the actual conditions and remuneration on the plantations showed a wide discrepancy. There were several protests and enquiries were instituted. It was the difference between the supposed conditions, as reported by the proprietors to British enquiries, and the actual conditions, as experienced by the coolies, which made all difference between a decent life and a miserable existence.

Such discrepancies could well be seen in the payment of wages. Officials did their best by using legal and extra-legal methods, to pressurise labourers into continuous

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29 Tinker, n.2, p.182.
employment and to force them to accept low wages. The labourers seldom received the rate of wages at which they were hired. Employers used a host of devices to retain a portion of workers earnings. It was a common practice to deduct a sum from monthly wages to refund money advances made to the labourers and as a security against misconduct. There is little evidence that the planters heeded the colonial officers objection to these methods. Wages could be reduced below the agreed levels by means of the double cut. The double cut was the most powerful device invented by the planters to repress the coolies, whereby anyone absent for a day, for whatever reason, lost his pay for two days. This system was finally abolished only in 1909. From the 1830s to the early 1900s the mandatory standard wage in all sugar plantation was 20 shillings a month i.e., Rs 40 a month. In Mauritius, the actual wage was half that sum – 10 shillings a months (Rs 20). Even these rates probably represent an overestimate of how much was actually paid to the labourers. The wages were subject to stoppages of an almost arbitrary sort for incomplete work, breakages, items in lieu of pay and fines for absence from work. Such a system represents another background of slavery: the employers did not really accept an obligation to give their people wages. Moreover, although redress against the breach of contract was available, legal processes were notoriously slow and the courts proverbially partial to the masters.

The Mauritian coolies worked 6 days a week. In addition they were required to do unpaid labour, Corvee, on Sundays. Corvee was a voluntary service, but it generally turned out to be forced and compulsory labour.

30 Ibid., p.184.
31 Ibid., p.188.
32 Ibid., p.186.
All the indentured people were strictly confined to the limits of their master’s estate, unless given permission to move outside under strictly regulated conditions. Even when the period of indenture was completed, in most of the sugar colonies, the ex-indentured PIOs were required to carry an identifying document called Livret. Absence from the estate without a pass called billet de pass in Mauritius, was an offence punishable by fine or imprisonment, while a prolonged absence was treated as desertion. The award of punishment of a summary nature was arrogated to the planters as their right, derived from their days of slavery. Beating and flogging appeared as a regular routine element in plantation discipline right upto the 20th century. Mauritius Royal Commission recorded that fifty PIOs had died of a ruptured spleen as a result of severe beatings, between 1867 and 1872, without stating that those responsible had been punished.33

While workers in most industrial societies face the penalty of losing their wages if they withhold their labour, the indentured coolies forfeited their pay and also found themselves condemned as criminals for such an action. It can be stated that the Mauritius authorities were obsessed with vagrancy. Vagrancy was a conception that the Mauritian planters could not discard, and right down to the end of indenture, if a time-expired coolie refused employment, he was classed as a vagrant and if he remained without registered employment for 3 months he became an “incorrigible vagrant”. The labour code of 1867 represented an attempt to place “old immigrants”, and even the free-passenger PIOs, under the close control and regimentation to which indentured labourers were subject. Protests were made against it. The Royal Commission of Enquiry of 1873, which was appointed to investigate the grievances of PIOs labourers, could not bring about much change in

33 North, n.4, p.95.
the labour code of 1867. Under the modified legislation, labourers could still be jailed for up to 3 months for desertion, while neglect of work etc could entail the loss of two weeks wages or imprisonment with hard labour for the same period. Moreover, the spirit in which the labour law of 1867 was framed continued to pervade the policies and practices of the colonial state with regard to PIOs indentured labour relations.

There were many estate labourers whose proper place was in hospital, or at any rate, under medical care. But medical attention was so casual and sometimes so callous, far too many of them prematurely ended their indentured servitude in death. From time to time large-scale epidemics scourged the sugar islands. Mauritius went through a cycle of epidemics during the 1860's, with malaria rampant in low-lying areas. Medical care had not much improved by the beginning of the 20th century. A report on estate hospitals in Mauritius (1902) shows that a total population of 91,924 was treated by 15 doctors in all the aspects of sickness and mortality on the plantation; the most serious cause was that of suicide. It was common for the immigrants to throw themselves overboard on the voyage, burdened by depression, and the depression of the first year or two of indenture was a bad time, when many sought to end their existence. The disparity between men and women was an important factor in shaping the coolies life on the plantation. A shortage of women is a feature of all pioneer immigrant societies, but this feature was artificially prolonged in the plantation by the perpetuation of mainly male immigration throughout the whole period of indenture. Males competed for scarce females and the absence of a wife or a housekeeper was a noticeable privation.

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34 Tinker, n. 2, p.192
Ordinance No. 16 of 1862 made a provision for the engagement of female immigrants for work on the sugar estates. The main purpose behind female immigration was to redress to some extent the sexual imbalance in the immigrant population. Their presence was seen as a necessity in purely functional terms by the colonists who characterised Indian women as leading lives of idleness and prostitution. The sub-collector of Nagarparum, responsible for emigration to Malaya said, ‘women do go, but many are of the ease-loving class of prostitutes’. A married woman is reluctant to go; for she fears the loss of her reputation.\(^{35}\)

This picture of women is at variance with the evidence of those Indian women arriving in Mauritius with their husbands. However, it was mainly as a result of the colonists attitudes and actions, through the policy of an essentially male immigration, the refusal to recognise marriages contracted in India in the colony, and the sexual exploitation of PIOs women by planters and sirdars, that Indian women came to seen as inherently immoral and PIOs women as leading a degraded existence in Mauritius\(^{36}\). Moreover, the move to employ female immigrants under contract was not for serving a moralistic purpose, but to stabilise the captive case of the labour force by attracting males to estate labour on a committed and permanent basis.

In Mauritius it was racism, which was used very successfully to provide for the preservation of the status quo. Racial discrimination was not rendered obsolete by emancipation. Instead, it was further elaborated and refined to legitimise continued planter domination of society, and the ruthless exploitation of Indian indentured labour. It focused its attention on degrees of whiteness rather than on any simple distinction between black and white, which was a ridiculous myth. The

\(^{35}\) Tinker;\(n.2\), p.201.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., p.205.
classifications of PIOs as unclean and ignorant, as semi-barbarous heathens who were naturally prone to crime, provided a justification for extreme policies of control and social neglect.\textsuperscript{37}

The education policies pursued by the colonial state gave effect to the notion that PIOs were only fit for unskilled labour. Most PIOs children living on sugar estates in the rural areas received no schooling at all, but instead, spent their days labouring in groups of two or three, clearing the cane fields of weeds and preparing for the staple produce of the colony. Planter neglect of PIOs education was tied up with a widespread colonial prejudice against the education of the poorer classes generally, as this was seen to be potentially dangerous for the labour intensive agricultural structure.\textsuperscript{38}

Apart from such gross neglect, the prison facilities were pathetic. In adjudication of disputes between masters and servants, the colonial judiciary was predisposed to favour the masters. In the early days of PIOs immigration, many complaints of brutality and mistreatment were lodged by indentured labourers against their masters. However most offenders (planters) were lightly let off. At times magistrates readily used their influence to persuade or cajole them to act in conformity with the interests of their employers.\textsuperscript{39}

In such pathetic conditions, the PIOs succeeded in retaining much of their identity. The preservation of the Indian languages was almost entirely due to the persistence of the coolies in speaking their mother tongue among themselves. The only occasions on which the estates PIOs emerged from their condition of servitude, to

\textsuperscript{37} North, n.4, p.98
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p.102
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p.102
create some replication of the colour and noise and majesty of their native land was during the time of festivals. To understand properly the repression of PIOs labour in Mauritius one must locate it within the context in continuation and wide ranging conflict waged between indentured workers and their employers. However, labour resistance took a passive or covert rather than a violent form. Moreover, the workers consciousness was not highly developed and individual resistance was more common than organised mass protests. The most widespread form of expressing dissatisfaction with the plantation regime was through voluntary withdrawal from labour, for periods ranging from short terms of absenteeism to permanent desertion.

Thus, from the above-mentioned description we realise that the indentured PIOs had to face a number of hardships on plantations and lived in condition of semi-slavery. It was only as the plantation system itself began to be modified that the PIOs gained some freedom from its grip. Yet they still lived in its shadow. There was to be a long period, in which the system was being questioned and challenged, before it was finally ended.

2.3. Immigration and Alternative for PIOs After the Indenture System
After the end of indenture system in Mauritius, change in the Mauritian political economy was slow but provided some alternatives for at least a segment of the PIOs population. In fact when we consider at the earlier history of Mauritius, the Mauritian economy reached a high point in 1850’s. During this period, Mauritius share was at its height of world sugar production. But by the end of the 1860’s the economy was in decline and from the 1880’s into the 20th century it was in acute crisis. Several developments set this decline in production. Most important was a worldwide increase in sugar production, both from cane and from sugar beets. Due
to subsidised sugar beet production and cheaper cane, Mauritius sugar became less competitive as the world price for sugar steadily fell.\textsuperscript{40}

The other factors also contributed, throughout and cyclones took their toll. This decline was further compounded by a devastating malaria epidemic that swept through the island from 1867 to 1869, killing an estimated 40,000-45,000, some 11 to 13 per cent of the population\textsuperscript{41}

The series of description led to the substantial reordering of local life. The declining fortune of the sugar industry forced the local plantocracy towards research. The big planter cut costs and consolidated their operations. There was also a sharp reduction in the number of sugar factories, from 250 or more in 1860 to around 100 at the turn of the century, as the milling of sugar became more centralised. These led to subdividing of sugar estates. During the grand morcellemist period, the Franco-Mauritian planters and estate holders consolidated the more profitable parts of their estates and sold the less profitable land. The properties sold were sometimes hundred acres in rural sectors but were more often small urban plots; most were no more than an acre or two. The critical purchasers were overwhelmingly PIOs, largely males who had come as indentured labourers and who, over the period of their contract or contracts, had been able to arrange some capital; later more families participated.

Later, when there was an opportunity to participate in the economy in a role beyond indenture, the small properties of the PIOs community that could afford to were quick to do so. Richard Allen has calculated that from 1864 to 1900, Indian


immigrants purchased property valued at over Rs.24 million. This was a substantial sum given that PIOs were paid less than 10 rupees per month and that land prices ranged from several hundred to Rs.1,000 per acre. By 1921, 93 per cent of the island’s planters were PIOs, and PIOs owned approximately 35 per cent of all the land under cultivation. The process of property acquisition gave PIOs population an opportunity to gain a toehold in the island economy. These developments changed the overall dynamics of sugar cultivation. Earlier sugar had been grown only on the estates under conditions of indenture. But after grand morcellement it was also grown on small-scale peasant plots. The immigrants purchasing these parcels of land practiced a wide variety of occupations such as trading crafts and others profession. Among the 381 immigrants whose purchase of a plot of land was recorded by Raoul between 1860 and 1884 were cooks, carpenters, gardeners, goldsmiths, labourers, peddlers, shopkeepers, servants and teachers. Finally, control of land and economic power set the stage for PIOs demands for access to the political process. These new developments in Mauritius gave the PIOs some new opportunities; initially it threatened the Franco-Mauritian domination of the colony’s politics and economy.

In 1909, Sir Frank Swetherham and others were commissioned to investigate the administrative and financial condition of Mauritius. These commissions carefully charted foreign ownership of the sugar estates and discovered that foreign capital owned only 21.2 per cent of the factories and 19.1 per cent of the estate land under sugar. Residents and non-residents owned by residents or local companies, or the rest of the estates jointly. But the productivity of the small planter remained low. Despite holding 43 per cent of the area, small planters produced only one–fourth

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42 Ibid., p.24.
of the total crop. This was so because all their money was sunk into the land and they were left with very little to use on modern techniques to increase the productivity.\(^43\) By 1884, the grand morcellement was an established feature of colonial life. It would remain so well into the early 20\(^{th}\) century. The social and economic consequences of morcellement were also becoming apparent. In 1861, the colony housed only 177 PIOs independent proprietors: 20 years later that number had increased fourfold. The number of PIOs gardeners likewise had risen from 4,351 in 1861 to more than 10,000 in 1881.\(^44\) The process of change in the socio economic life of immigrants PIOs was initiated after the introduction of the grand morcellement.

2.4. Economic Prosperity and Changes in the Awareness among the PIOs
From the above incidence we may conclude that after the introduction of the morcellement the condition of PIOs had improved. From 1834 onwards, there had been a sharp change in the ethnic composition of Mauritius. The abolition of slavery in Mauritius in 1835 and the eventual emancipation of the Negro slaves posed an acute labour problem for the Mauritian planters. Sugar plantations had faced ruin and desolation and Mauritius could have suffered the fate of the West Indian sugar colonies but the waves of immigration as indentured labour from the Indian subcontinent averted the crisis. The planters were rescued from the impending crisis by docile and cheap labour from the major ports of India like Bombay, Madras and Calcutta averted the economic collapse of the colony. In less than 3 decades following mass immigration in 1834, the social composition of Mauritius underwent a radical change. From the small number of 75 male arrivals in 1834, the figure rose to 30,000 males and 4,000 females in 1843. By 1846, only

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p.25.
\(^{44}\) Allen, n.40, pp.157-16
12 years after the start of official PIOs immigration, the PIOs population was already 56,000 out of a total of 158,000—that is slightly more than one third of the to 78,000 out of a total of 181,000. Huge waves of PIOs immigrants were to follow and in the years 1858 and 1859, 30,000 and 43,000 PIOs respectively landed in Mauritius. By 1871, more than two thirds of the population was already PIOs-216,000 out of a total of 316,000.

The whole state apparatus from 1834 onwards was geared towards the oppression of the Indian immigrants. Instead of a rightful share in the affairs of government, the Indo-Mauritians were debarred from any political right. In collusion with the planters and the merchants, the council of government-the total legislative Council of Government passed a series of repressive laws, which, in practice, perpetuated the old system of slavery. Accordingly, the labour relations during the period 1834 to 1934 were dictated by the oppressive labour legislations characterised by a master-servant philosophy where the servants, the Indian immigrant, then eventually the Indo-Mauritian, had only duties but no corresponding rights vis-à-vis his master, the Franco-Mauritian planter. A law in which a labourer was sentenced to imprisonment in case of absence from work was revoked in 1922. Only after the illegal general strike of 1937 during which four workers were shot dead, brutal oppression, harsh and inhuman living and working conditions came to an end. After 1938, workers were allowed to form industrial associations, which grew into genuine trade unions.

2.5. Indian Immigrants and Social Structure in Mauritius before 1948
Social structures in Mauritius are highly complex. A deep cleavage exists between racial and ethnic groups. Divisions are sharpened not only by the racial factors but also by the political, institutional and economic productive structures. In this
section an attempt has been made to study the historical background of PIOs in Mauritian society and how the majority PIOs have performed in different fields. In the first phase of immigration most of the Indians were assimilated in the French culture. Therefore, the social structure of different ethnic communities appears the same in that period. The immigration of Indians during the British colonial period evolved a different kind of social structure. The social life of the Indian immigrants centred round the ‘baithka’, which was the village club. On every estate, and in the surrounding villages, there were such organisations, where Indian immigrants would meet in the evenings and read their religious books. Life followed the same patterns as in India. Social discipline was observed and all the four classes, which made up the social hierarchy, were solidly bound by the rules. The ceremonies associated with births and deaths were performed in much the same way as in the motherland and many of the festivals were observed.

2.5.1 Nature of PIOs Settlement Facilitate the PIOs Ascendancy
The settlement of Indians and the formation of Indian villages strengthened the position of PIOs in Mauritius. The early immigrants were housed in quarters vacated by slaves. Each estate had one or several camps. Immigrants were crowded into huts with little regard to caste, religion or linguistic groups. The regulations providing that immigrants should be properly housed and fed and provided with medical care were often ignored. The Royal Commissioners of 1872 found housing unsatisfactory on many estates. As late as 1943, estate housing was still considered unsatisfactory with cramped quarters, inadequate ventilation, lack of privacy, poor sanitation, insufficient water, and under-equipped hospitals. After the end of indentured system, the Indians left the estate camp. In 1861, there were 84,727 (44 per cent of the Indian population) living on estates. In 1871 it had dropped to
61,893 (28 per cent of the Indian population) and by 1904 there were only 40,426 (approximately 15 per cent) Indians left on the estates. In 1956 there were 36,273 (approximately 9 per cent) residents in estate camps.  

From 1847 onward, the secretary of state had taken several initiatives to establish Indian villages in Mauritius. However, each time the proposal was opposed by the estate owner by giving the rationale that villages would draw labourers away from the field. Indian villages were formed by one or more PIOs acquiring a plot of land by 'morcellement'. Having settled on it themselves, they brought in relatives or friends from the estate camp. They rented and sold a few small plots, the income being used to pay off the debts to the planters from whom they had obtained the land. In this way villages developed. Once the villages were settled, the PIOs preferred to have their own houses and to be free to seek employment where they chose. The process of settlement of Indians in Mauritius helped them to gain political power in Mauritius. The permanent settlement also broke the dependency syndrome. After that there was a gradual improvement in the social, political and economic condition of Indians in Mauritius. After 1948, when they acquired the right to vote their position was further strengthened.

2.5.2 Working Condition of PIOs and Struggle for Assertion

The harsh working condition of PIOs motivated them to struggle for their rights which further translated into political right. The conditions of indentured labourers in Mauritius was extremely harsh, the pay was Rs 5 or 10 shillings per month; the monthly amount scarcely changed during the entire period of indenture, with the result that the labourers faced a steadily falling real wage. Even these low wages

46 Ibid.
were subjected to numerous deductions by the planters. An absence from work for 6 days in a month meant the month would not count in terms of service. In Mauritius, alone among the sugar colonies, labourers were subjected to the most powerful device invented by planters to exploit the coolies—the double cut, whereby absence of work for one day meant the loss of two days pay. In 1874, Robat Mitchell, who had been assistant protector of emigrants, declared the effect using the double cut was to reduce the wage bill on good estates by one-third, and on bad estates to lower wages to one-half the proper level. 47

Coolies were expected to work a six-day week and then performed unpaid on Sunday. The work was hard, in an often-oppressive climate, and flagging efforts generally resulted in severe beatings. Strict vagracy laws were passed to help the planters hold workers on the estates. Over time, labourers on both their first and subsequent contracts was forced to carry passes; beginning in 1867 passes had to include a photograph of the bearer. Labourers found without passes outside their residential district of the island were subject to arrest and punishment.

The planters tended to be quite obsessive about vagrancy, and vagrant hunts, like the marron hunts of the slave period—was a popular sport at the time. In 1869, an extreme year, 30824 PIOs were arrested, most under vagrancy regulations, in an effort to compel re indenture; of these, 1253 were condemned labour, which presumably was what they were trying to avoid. 48

Only in 1872-73, responding to concerns expressed about the indentured labour system in Mauritius, the British government appointed a royal commission to investigate matters. The report was submitted by Sir William Frere and Victor

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47 Tinker, n.2, p.115.
A. Williamson. Their report became the basic document in the matter of PIOs in Mauritius. The report provided extensive details on planter's abuses of indentured labour and condemned almost everything and everybody in Mauritius.49 Through out the indenture period, the exploitation of PIOs labour was carried out under conditions, which hardly varied at all. 50

The impetus for the end of indenture came from India, not from Mauritius. Only when public opinion in India changed did the system finally become vulnerable. In Mauritius protest occasionally took the form of petitions or desertions, but more of these seriously threatened the system. Indian patience seemed inexhaustible, and it was not until 1917 that the system was formally ended, though departures to Mauritius ended in 1910.

2.5.3 PIOs in Different Professions and the Civil Service
Gradually, after a few years of PIOs immigration, when the PIOs population stabilised, a generation of Mauritian-born PIOs grew up. By 1898, Mauritian-born PIOs outnumbered those born in India. The diversification of PIOs in different fields started only when the children of immigrants completed their education. In 1851, PIOs constituted 43 per cent of the population but only 4 per cent were professionals and 27 per cent were in the civil service. By 1901, 70 per cent of the population was PIOs, out of which 23 per cent were professionals and 28 per cent in the civil service. In 1952 PIOs constituted 67 per cent of the population. The Indian percentage in the professions had risen to 27 per cent and in the civil service to 53 per cent.51 Table 1 (see Annex) shows the percentage representation of Indian in the legal, medical and teaching professions. The above mention numeric

49 Tinker, n.2, p.250.
50 Ibid., p.116.
51 Benedict, n.45, pp.28-30.
representation of PIOs in Mauritius shows that gradually Indian were asserting themselves in the Mauritian system. In the initial phase of their immigration the condition of Indians was harsh and difficult but with the improvement in their economic and social conditions their profile changed in Mauritian society.

2.5.4 Education of PIOs: Ticket for Political Ascendancy

Education played an important role in the socio-economic development of PIOs in Mauritius. Historically, due to the dominance of different colonial powers, the benefit of education was restricted to them. By the early 1850's, Mauritian society was pyramidal in structure with the whites occupying the apex, the ex-slaves at the base, and the people of mixed blood in between. Emancipation of slaves brought a change in the lower section of the pyramid. In other words, the division between the coloureds and slaves was blurred legally but not socially. Whites occupied the position of supremacy in all fields. The coloured population of mixed parentage pressed for social reform especially in the education sector. It was however, at the level of the labour classes that the society broke down into alienated social groups. The government's organised Indian immigration to meet the immediate needs of the sugar estates failed to build up an integrated community. Instead, the Indian labouring classes were isolated in camps and the government imposed pains and penalties for breaking contracts or leaving the estates without permission. No attempts had been made before 1852 to provide education to Indian children although they had been brought in since 1834.

The level of literacy among the PIOs was very low. Up to April 1931, 10,811 boys and 3,884 girls of Indian origin were attending primary and secondary schools. Among the PIOs only 8214 could read and write European languages and 5,000
had a slight knowledge of only Indian languages. In 1857, the colonial legislature passed a resolution in Mauritius to make education compulsory. That ordinance remained a dead letter. It was never applied because there were some dissensions. The ordinance stipulated that the medium of instruction should be French and the board of the East India Company protested to the British Government, against using French as a medium of instruction for the Indian children. So the ordinance was never put into practice and it is a fact that the education of Indian children was virtually ignored. In fact, the Royal Commission of 1872 reported that only 1,000 Indian children were attending school out of a total of 39,000.

It was certainly not in the interest of the planters to encourage the education of Indian children for the simple reason that the latter could make themselves useful by doing light work on the estates. Besides, in view of the state of economic destitution of the immigrants, they preferred to take their children to work in the fields to supplement their meager income. There was also the fact that the PIOs were skeptical about the form of education based on the western model. It was a declared policy of the colonial legislature in Mauritius to assimilate the PIOs to integrate them in Mauritian society. The assimilation meant that PIOs would have to speak the French language. They had to live French way of life, they had to accept French culture and French religion, i.e. the Catholic religion and this was one of the reasons why many Indian parents refused to send their children to school because they feared that their children would be forced to become

54 Hazarce singh, n.21, pp.47-52.
The same approach of the colonial rule continued during British rule. Through the missionaries school they were greatly tempted to convert the Indian masses to Christianity. The Hindus resisted this approach of the colonial rulers.\(^{55}\)

In 1900, due to the intervention of Indian leaders and socio-religious groups and new generation Indo-Mauritians oriental languages were introduced in Mauritius. Arya Samaj opened up its own school to educate both youth and children. The effort of leaders and the spread of oriental languages helped the PIOs to grab political power. The movement of assertion of PIOs started after the literacy movement in Mauritius.

The health facilities for the Indian immigrants was very poor. It is another important area for consideration to understand the condition of the Indian labourer in Mauritius. At the time of epidemics nobody took the responsibility for the health care of Indian immigrants. Owing to negligence of authorities, PIOs died like flies. There were many estates labourers whose were proper place was permanently in hospital, under strict medical care. However, medical attention was so casual and times so callous, that many ended their indentured servitude in death. Mauritius went through a cycle of epidemics during 1860’s, with malaria rampant in low-lying areas. Medical care was not much improved by the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century. A report on estate hospitals in Mauritius (1902) reflects that out of total population of 91,924 was cared by 15 doctors in all of the aspects of sickness and mortality on the plantation, the most somber was that of suicide. It was common for the immigrants to throw themselves overboard on the voyage, and the depression of time, when many sought to end their existence overboard on the

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56 Ibid., p.183.
voyage, and the depression of the first year or two of indenture was a bad time, when many sought to end their existence. 57

2.6. Regulations and Irregularity before 1948—Initiation of Symbolic Assertion of PIOs

The transportation of PIOs' labour was started in 1735-47, when the French ruled Mauritius. Regular immigration under the legislation began after 1844. Through the introduction of legislation, an attempt had been made in Mauritius to provide some protection to the immigrants. However, it was unsuccessful. All the freedom and welfare measures for the labourer was not implemented in actual terms. 58 The Act 21 of 1843, passed by the Government of India after the visit of Anderson mentions that there should be a provision for a protector and an agent at Calcutta and laying down the necessity for a large proportion of women to be included in the total emigration to Mauritius. Five hundred men, exclusive of women and children were to go every month to Mauritius, the rate of wages being Rs 5 per month, together with food, clothing and lodging. New rules also included provision for an European or an Indian doctor to be on board all vessels carrying emigrants to Mauritius.

Act of 1842.

The act of 1842 was passed to attract more PIOs and better working condition for them. The important aspects of this act includes:

1. Provision to protect the immigrants against exploitation and injustice. Under this act some emigration officers were given new responsibility.

2. There was a provision to appoint a protector of immigrants from time to time.

57 Tinker, n.2, p.2.
58 Hazareesingh, n.21, p.27.
3. The Act also specifies that no one should be induced to immigrate by fraud or unreasonable expectations. The distance to Mauritius should be made known and the immigrants were required to be in good health.

4. An adequate supply of water, rice, bread, biscuit, flour, oatmeal and other foodstuffs to the amount of 7 pounds should be earmarked for every passenger.

5. The ship, on which the immigrants would travel, should be in good condition.

6. They should be provided with food and other necessary things by the captain of every ship even during 48 hours after the arrival of his ship in the country.

7. They should be left free to choose their employers.

8. In case they would not like to stay on, they should be allowed to go back at their own expense.\(^5^9\)

The Act of 1842, meant to be an improvement on the earlier Act of 1840, was even worse. At the time of formation of law, it was believed that through this Act the planters would respect its provisions and the labourers would be offered some better conditions of service. But as in the past, the planters became indifferent to food, shelter and clothing. They did not pay wages on the agreed terms. According to law every estate had to be provided with a hospital, but this was not so in actual practice. Stricken with diseases, the helpless PIOs were left to die without any care or medicine. In case of absence due to illness, they were deprived of rations and wages. On the one hand they had to please the sirdars whereas, on the other, they remained at the mercy of the cruel sugar-barons.

Apart from this, various legislation effecting immigration was passed by the local legislation in 1844. This included building of hospitals, the provision of food, 

lodging for labourers on rural estates and the suppression of vagrancy. The implementation of this legislation did not take place. However, the colonial government realised that 500 was too small numbers to fulfill the demand of labourers, they brought several legislations to amend the existing contract between the Indian government and Anderson. Estate owner implemented only those provisions, which brought profit to them.

The Act of 1847
Among the legal frame work for the repression of the PIOs were 2 vicious and repressive ordinances, namely, ordinance no.22 of 1847 and no.31 of 1867. Ordinance no 22 of 1847 made it compulsory for all old Indian immigrants, that is Immigrants who had completed their indentured period to possess tickets as a certificate of identity and any immigrant found outside his residential district was to be arrested and treated as a vagrant. Vagrant hunts were a routine, just like in the old days of slavery when maroon hunting was a favourite pass time of the planters. It was organised to catch marooned PIOs. It was alleged that PIOs had a psychological urge to wander idly. Any Indian who could not show proof that he had a job, a plot of land, and a house to live in was caught as a vagrant and was sentenced first to hard labour and, on completion of the prisons sentence was forced to re-indenture on the plantation. The law of 1847 also provided for the

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60 Ibid., p.30.
61 According to Ordinance 22 of 1847 the labour was liable to imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months, if found outside his residential district without the certificate of identity. There was to be a register of all new immigrants; they were to acquire industrial resistance in the colony after completion of five years service under a planter, the contract to be on stamped paper, or alternatively on payment of a tax of four shillings per month, the Governor nevertheless having the power to exempt any labourer from such an obligation. The right to a free return passage to India depended upon the completion of five years service, and if the immigrant wished to return earlier, he was required to pay one pound ten shillings for a year, the rate to be applied for any period of time necessary for the completion of the contract. The employers were to pay stamp duty of one pond on engaging a new immigrant for the first engagement, this sum being reduced to four shillings by the time of fifth re-engagement.
62 Hazareesingh, n.21, pp.32-34.
notorious double cut system. Under this repugnant system the labourers absent from work without leave not only had their wages and rations forfeited for the non working days, but they had to pay a daily indemnity to their master, which meant a loss of two days pay for each day marked absent. An immigrant was allowed only to absent for only 6 days in a month to remain as a part of the industrial residence.

The Acts of 1867

Immigration had been suspended in various phases such as 1836, 1839 and 1856, but it was subsequently re-opened at the request of the planters. With the abolition of premium under Act of 1844, competition was almost suppressed, but immigration did not continue as expected. The decline in the labour force and other problems like droughts and epidemics affected the planters economically. Under such disturbing circumstances the Acts of 1867 was passed. Some of its important clauses are

1. All the immigrants had to register themselves failing which they were to be arrested and send to a vagrant depot.
2. Everyone had to carry a police pass with his photo affixed on it.
3. The immigrants could not move to any place without a police pass.

The legislation was repugnant and practically turned Mauritius into a police state as far as PIOs were concerned. In 1867, the sugar barons used their influence on the Council of Government to place on the statute book one of the most blatantly discriminatory and oppressive ordinances in the island’s history. Ordinance 31 of 1867 was applied only to PIOs and, in particular to the immigrants who had

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63 Hazareesingh, n.21, p.33.
64 Varma, n.59, pp.64-65.
completed their initial indenture periods. It instituted a police state, with regards to
the PIOs with a strict and vigorous control of the movement of the old immigrants.
All the old immigrants were required to carry tickets with their photographs and a
police pass, which was provided free on the completion of their indenture period. If
these were lost, the old immigrant had to pay 5 dollars for the ticket, 2 shillings for
the photo, all together a sum of 22 shillings-a sum equivalent to about 2 months
wages on the estate. Whenever they moved from their districts they had to have
their passes and tickets otherwise they would be treated as criminals and were sent
to the vagrant depot to break stones. The Law of 1867 was not new: it merely
consolidated the previous repressive labour laws, in particular that of 1847. It was
in the severity of its application, the excesses and the brutalities of the police force
and its administration by biased magistrates-biased because the magistrates were
themselves in league with the planting community and were in many cases
themselves planters, that it led to gross abuses and grave injustice. Several times
labourers were arrested in batches of 50's, tied to a cord and dragged to the police
station. Some were arrested even when their passes and tickets were in order
simply because the police officers were mistaken as to the boundaries of the
districts where they actually lived. In 1866, the number of people arrested for
vagrancy was 6500, that figure rose to 7700 in 1867, to 8900 in 1868 and 30,824 in
1869. The old immigrant could not visit a sick relative or attend a funeral outside
his residential district without first having his pass endorsed by the police inspector
of the district. Vegetable sellers could not pursue their trade as they were stopped
on an average of 3 times on their way to the markets. Each times their papers were
checked and even if they were in order they had to wait for half an hour to get their
documents back. By the time they reached the market place in the town of Port Louis, it was already closing time.

The main purpose of the 1867 law was to drive the PIOs back to the sugar estates. After having completed his term of service of 3 or 5 years, the immigrant attempted to become self-employed, to become independent, took to gardening, and kept cattle. This created a shortage of labour on the sugar estate and, further more, those PIOs who had already worked on the plantations, the old immigrants, had acquired some experience of labouring in the cane fields. Therefore the planters did not want to undergo any additional expense by importing fresh immigrants from India when they could access the immigrants in Mauritius itself. Importing people from India stand a risk, because not everybody could adapt to work in the cane fields. On the other hand, the old immigrants had already proved their worth. The plantocracy could not afford to lose these people. Therefore they used the legislature to pass an ordinance restricting these people unless they wanted to starve, on the plantations. After the repressive Acts of 1847 and 1867, several initiatives had been taken to improve the working conditions of the people. Adolph Von Plevitz played an important role here. He organised labourer and submitted several petition to the colonial government. On the basis of complaints and petitions, the Royal commission was set up. The report of the commission highlighted the real working condition in the sugar estate. On the basis of the recommendations of the Royal Commission a law was passed in 1878.

The law of 1878.
Some of the salient features of the 1878 act are as follows:

65 Based on a personal interview with Raj Mathur
1. The protector of immigrants was ordered to visit the sugar estates, to receive complaints of the labourers conduct investigations, institute legal proceedings and fix wages.

2. He was also instructed to visit hospitals, check books and registers. He could sue the employers on behalf of the labourers for violation of contract.

3. It was necessary for a medical officer to visit and report on all estate hospitals at least once in 6 months.

4. One month’s wage should be given to labourers at the time of embarkation.

5. Every contract of service was limited to one month unless made before a magistrate in which case it could be extended to 5 years.

6. The immigrants could be re-engaged after 5 years.

7. Nine hours of work were prescribed for fieldwork and some provisions were laid down for additional payment for overtime work.

8. The principle that only one day’s wages should be deducted for one day’s absence was accepted.

9. It was agreed that the return passage of the immigrants be paid by the government.

10. The pass system was withdrawn.\textsuperscript{66}

In fact, the law of 1878 nullified that of 1867, which had become draconian. It was primarily meant to remove some abuses, irregularities and malpractices inherent in the system of immigration. With the operation of the law, it was believed that the labourers would not be subjected to injustice, harassment and exploitation as in the past. But such was not the case, because its proper execution was neglected. Many of its provisions were also frequently violated. But this Act send a message to the

\textsuperscript{66} Varma, n.59, pp.75-76.
planters that they should be careful with their workers. This was the first step of assertion of PIOs in administrative system of Mauritius. On the basis of this law several other initiatives had been taken which helped the Indians to establish their position in the islands social, political and economic affairs.

The Labour Law of 1922

After the abolition of Indian immigration and the initiatives taken by several groups to change the existing system, it became necessary for the colonial government to define a new relationship between labour and capital. In this regard a new set of law was introduced under the labour law of 1922 to change the condition and status of labourers. Some of its provisions were as follows:

1. The labourers would not be forced to live in the camps of the sugar estates.
2. The contract entered into between both the worker and the employer was to last for one month only.
3. If working conditions were unsatisfactory, a labourer was free to leave his employer.
4. He could move from one estate to another in search of work.
5. It was made clear that no one would lose 2 days wages for 1 day's absence.\(^67\)

The important aspect of 1922 law was that it provided mobility to the labourers to move from one estate to another. The liberty to the Indian labourers provided them other opportunities. After 1922 several sugar plantation labourers shifted their job to dairy farming keeping and small trade etc. In this way a large number of Indians became self-employed and many of them also began to buy land for sugar cane plantations. The law of 1877 and 1922 provided an opportunity to the sugar

\(^{67}\) Ibid., pp.78-79.
plantation worker to grow independently. Their economic independence and education led to their political assertion.

2.7. PIOs Immigrant and Role of Socio-Religious Organisation before 1948

Social and religious organisations played an important role in the promotion of awareness among the PIOs. Before 1948 there were two organisations that actively participated in all the movement. The first one was the Indian cultural organisation, a organisation of Indian intellectuals. By the 1930’s there was a small group of PIOs who had been educated abroad, often in France or England and who had returned to Mauritius to professional positions in law, medicine, or education. The year 1935 marked the centenary of PIOs in Mauritius, and this group organised a celebration. The most prominent figure in the Indian cultural association was Seewoosagur Ramgoolam. Ramgoolam, who was destined to become Mauritius first prime minister, had only returned in 1934 after spending many years in England training to be a doctor. He played a prominent role in the centenary celebrations and soon began to build a political base within the Indian community. From the beginning, Ramgoolam showed a marked ability to move easily between elite circles and Indian agricultural workers. Ramgoolam and others in the Indian elite were soon publishing their own paper, The Advance, and in 1940 Ramgoolam was nominated Basdeo and Sookdev Bissoondoyal who had initiated a Hindu cultural revival movement in 1943. Since the departure of Manilall Doctor in 1911, they were among the first PIOs leaders to attempt to arouse the poorest of the Indian labourers. The Bissoondoyal brothers concentrated

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their efforts at the village level, where they organised schools to teach Indian culture and languages, literacy and most important of all pride and self-respect. 69

Unions and formal associations of labourers were not the only organisations to appeal to the poor in Mauritius. Soon after the 1943 riots, a traditional movement focusing on the revival of Hindu culture began to gather support, led by Basdeo Bissoondoyal. The movement was very much like that of the independent schools and churches in the early days of nationalism. Philosophy was its main inspiration until 1948. His brother, Sookdeo, was his right hand man, but as a government schoolteacher, Sookdeo’s political activity was limited until he resigned from the teaching post in 1946. 70

Since the departure of Manilall in 1911, the Indo-Mauritian community had lacked traditional leadership. Community spokesmen, such as R. Boodhun and Gujadhar, elected representatives to the council of government had European attitudes. In 1939 a reporter for the Calcutta statesman visited Mauritius and found that there was, in fact nobody who had any real authority or power enough to sound the trumpet call that would rally the Hindus together, retain them within the Vedic fold, and bring about the unification of the various sects and creeds that composed the great Hindu tradition.

Basdeo Bissoondoyal learned about the Labour Party activities when he was studying in Calcutta, but when he returned to Mauritius he decided to start a separate movement. Like Manilall, they also believed that if they taughtPIOs in Mauritius to read and write their own language and understand their own religion

70 See Moonindra Nath Varma, “Life and Work of Pandit Bissoondoyal” (Mauritius, Quatre Bornes, 1997).
and culture he would be giving them pride in their heritage. Bissoondoyal founded schools for Indian culture and language, holding evening session for the workers, and afternoon sessions for children, most of whom attended government schools in the morning. In addition, Bissoondoyal held special meetings for the women, who had been ignored by the Labour Party in spite of their considerable contribution towards finance of the family. Although Bissoondoyal and his brother lived in Port Louis, their first school, were in the south they could avoid conflict with the powerful Ramanarian. To staff them, Bissoondoyal trained over 800 teachers and supplied them with a Hindi grammar and children’s readers that he had written.

Public meetings were forbidden because of the war, but Bissoondoyal was not deterred; he went to jail 3 times between 1943 and 1944 for holding illegal gatherings. Unlike others his meetings were usually held in baithkas, meeting places or clubhouses that were used as the center of religious and community activity for Hindus in village neighbourhoods. He understood even better than others about the value of baithkas and local village organisations, and assiduously cultivated traditional Hindu leadership. Consequently, baithka presidents approved of Bissoondoyal’s efforts and were honoured when he held meetings on their premises. The professor was also an avid pamphleteer and wrote at length about his personal experiences and philosophy. The knowledge of French, and Hindi, glorifying his teachings and the Hindu religion. Just as to create labourers were committed to rozement, the Indian labourers gravitated to Bissoondoyal the man. A personality cult grew around him. There were accusations but even that did not detract from his support.

By 1946 Bissoondoyal’s influence, which had begun in the south, extended throughout the island. The police watched closely, concerned that his hold over lies
follow as might approach that of Gandhi’s India. They realised that Bissoondoyal lacked Gandhi’s intellectual ability but they feared that in a community devoid of leaders, charlatans and demagogue could as easily gain a following. In January 1947, the deputy commissioner of police persuaded the governor that Bissoondoyal were about to pack up having made a lot of money in the last few years.\(^71\)

Indian intellectuals, particularly those with their fingers on the pulse of politics shared the British distrust of Bissoondoyal. They were anxious to keep the Indian community united under their control, and saw him, jealously, as a divisive force. At the same time, it would have been heretical to criticise someone who was promoting Indian customs and language. The intellectuals therefore chose silence their newspapers, Advance, did not usually report Bissoondoyal’s activities or public meetings curiously the only recognition Bissoondoyal ever had from the established press was from i.e. Maurician: under the editorship of Raoul Rivet. The paper gave Bissoondoyal meetings full coverage, trying to weaken the Indian community by emphasising the differences between Bissoondoyal and the intellectuals.\(^72\)

The professional disapproval did not affect Bissoondoyal’s popularity. To the PIOs in the village, his lessons from the ancient Vedas sounded more relevant than the western and still foreign ideas of those who had just returned from England and France. Many Mauritians who grew up in villages in the 1940s, who found allegiance themselves grow in positions of responsibility did not hide their cleft to Bissoondoyal, who gave them a feeling of self-respect and pride in their heritage

\(^71\) Varma; n.66.
\(^72\) Hazareesingh, n.21, pp.72-90.
and a self-confidence that was essential to success. Certainly during the war the
popularity of Bissoondoyal and Ramnarain were greater than that of either the
Labour Party or the Indo-Mauritian professional elite, and when the time came to
discuss constitutional reform and an extension of the Franchise, Bissoondoyal
could not be excluded. Some of his achievements were highly practical as well
Bissoondoyal deserves credit for the large number of PIOs who were able to pass
the literacy tests required of voters in 1948. From the 1948 election, it was clear
that among the beneficiaries of his education programme for the masses were the
Indian elite who mistrusted him; they owed their new seats to the constituency,
which he helped create.

2.8. Political Participation by PIOs – Passport for Ascendancy
The political development of PIOs before 1948 was restricted to limited voting
rights and a low level of political awareness existed among the PIOs. In the early
days of immigration little thought was given about the place of the Indian in the
political life of the island. There was even uncertainty about their settlement in
Mauritius. The provision of a free return passage and the time limit of the labour
contract was based on the assumption that immigrants would return to India. On
the other hand there were advocates of permanent Indian settlements in Mauritius
as it is evident from several provisions like the establishment of Indian villages.73
Before the 20th century, life on Mauritius was extremely harsh for non-Franco
Mauritian. The colonial rule of the British on Mauritius was always a curious
matter. Though Mauritius accepted the British presence, it was often little more
than a formality. The Franco-Mauritian elite dominated Mauritian Society. Very
little was done to ameliorate the situation. It was only when the Creoles and then

73 Benedict, n.45, p.29.
the PIOs began to demand constitutional reform and economic relief, that the British began to contemplate a new Mauritius. British recognition that change must come was not made explicit until the 1947 constitution was drafted; before that, from 1810 to 1948, Mauritius remained an outpost of the anarchy regime. 74

The relationship between the British governor and local administration, and the Franco-Mauritian community was seldom an easy one. The Franco-Mauritian tolerated the British presence as long as it benefited them economically and did not intrude upon their political and social dominance. A few changes occurred in the Mauritian political system after the introduction of the constitution.

2.8.1 Participation of PIOs through the Constitutional Development
In the constitution of 1831, there was no provision for the representation of PIOs in Mauritian political affairs. The constitution of 1831 provided a provision for a council of government of 7 official members and 7 non-official members, chosen by the governor. This constitution remained in force for 55 years. The nominees were to advise the governor on how to govern the colony. They were mainly Europeans chosen from the planter and commercial class. Under the 1885 constitution, elections were held regularly throughout the island, and though the masses did not yet have the right to vote, they became involved in political life by participating in political meetings and the election campaign. The Constitution of 1885 provided 28 members for Council of Government, namely the governor as president, 8 ex-officio, 3 nominated and 10 elected members. According to the new constitution, Port Louis was to elect 2 representatives whereas the other districts

were to elect one representative each to the Council of Government. The right to vote for these elections was granted to only male British subjects. The qualification for voting practically debarred all PIOs. Some of the PIOs, through the morcellement movement, owned movable property, cash or jewellery but they were unable to speak English. In the first election of 1886, under the new constitution, an Indo-Mauritian was appointed to the electoral commission. Out of total electorate of 4,061, the Indian voters numbered 253 in which 129 were Hindus and 124 were Muslims and most of them were from Port Louis. In 1891, 298 Hindus and 103 Muslims voted out of a total electorate of 5,164. The first Indian member of the legislative council was nominated by the governor in 1886, but PIOs by and large continued without effective representation because the minority which voted could not elect a candidate against a majority of electors belonging to the general population.

Restricted voting right played an important role in reflecting the representation of PIOs in the election before 1948. Indian candidates stood unsuccessfully in the election of 1906 and 1911. Only in the 1926 election were 2 PIOs were elected from rural districts to the Council of Government. However in the 1931 election both the candidates were defeated. Again in 1944, an Indian was once more elected. Indian were also debarred from voting. The constitution of 1885 remained in force until 1947; it was only in 1947 that the old constitution of 1885 was

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75 In the 1885 election the electors were be 1. The owner of an immovable property of an annual value of Rs 300/- i.e a piece of land or a house that had an annual rental value of Rs 300/2. Owner of movable property of the value of Rs 3,000/i.e.cash or jewellery worth Rs 3,000/3. Payment of a monthly rent of Rs 25/4. The husband or the eldest son of a widow possessing one of the above qualifications. It is to be noted that women did not have the right to vote by the constitution of 1885. But if they possessed wealth, movable or immovable property to the amounts stipulated in the constitution, then their eldest sons or husbands could vote on their behalf. 5. Any one who was earning at least Rs 600/- per annum was granted the vote. 6. Anyone paying a licence duty of at least Rs 200/per annum was also eligible to vote.

76 Bendict, n.45, p 30.
amended and replaced by a new constitution, granting the voting right to all those passing a simple literacy test. 77

The Indian masses were gradually drawn into the political system, and the political experience acquired by the merchant class was moderately used in the 1880's to defend its economic interests. Soon it began to develop other concerns. In 1885 Indian were asked to be represented on the Franchise Commission. However, those nominated belonged to the first group of PIOs who were thoroughly assimilated in European culture and therefore more representative of the interest of the white and other coloured groups rather than the PIOs. Though the choice was made by the governor, the Indian had no alternative with regard to the choosing of these professionals. During the debates on the reform of the constitution, one of the most important issues centered on the political future of the PIOs. The oligarchy was divided: one group opposed reform because it would eventually place power in the hands of the PIOs, the other group and the coloured advocated reform. The coloured advocated reform on the grounds that the advance of PIOs would be halted by appropriate measures. The other group, meanwhile, were convinced that PIOs would be thoroughly assimilated. William Newton, the leader of the oligarchy explained his plan. The Mauritian race enjoyed moral and intellectual superiority. We must not forget there is springing up in this Colony, an indigenous Indian population which is more or less brought up under the influence of Christian civilisation which we can by proper care, turn into a new and vigorous stock of Mauritians. By them, and through them, we shall absorb the Asiatics. Let us form a

77 Ibid.
sort of intellectual aristocracy that will remain at their head and lead them in the path of light and progress." 78

Both the oligarchy and the coloured shared the same views on the future of the PIOs, except that the oligarchy wanted to benefit in the short term from the class vote of the wealthy PIOs. The PIOs on the franchise commission were representative of PIOs only in name, and the failure to secure representatives more faithful to their views was due to absence of western educated professionals among the merchant class. Already in 1875, Indian electors at the municipal election were intimidated by polling officers. One hundred and twenty-five Indian electors were unable to cast their votes because they were asked to show for whom they were voting, and also because the numbers on the bulletins were in roman characters which they could not understand. In 1900 when Charles Bruce, the governor, was asked by the secretary of state to lower the qualification for the franchise to increase the influence of PIOs, he refused because he "judged the Indian Community unfit for the exercise of political privileges as it would simply increase the influence of wire pullers. The major obstacle to the nomination of PIOs was that they could not speak French. 79 The lack of western education was a major factor in delaying the political advancement of PIOs as it made them more vulnerable to intimidation, and easier for the oligarchy to ignore their claim and restrain them from political action.

In the first elections of 1885, there were about 295 Indian electors in an electoral roll of 4,000. However by 1906, it reached 1,400 in an electorate of 7,800 and by 1921 it constituted 31 per cent of the electorate. It was a small electorate but

79 Ibid
sufficiently important to become established as a factor in the calculation of both the plantocracy and the coloured. Right from 1885, both whites and coloureds had appealed to Indian voters. Even when Manilall Doctor arrived in Mauritius in 1907 to work among PIOs, the political presence of the PIOs had not advanced considerably. Indian merchants had sought representation on several boards and had protected against changes in customs regulations, which affected them, but they had been unsuccessful. There was representation of PIOs in the Council: G Arlanda, X. Nalletamby and Dr H. Sakir, but they were not socially or culturally close to the merchant class of the Indian labourers and therefore remained insensitive to their problems. Under the influence of Manilall Doctor the list of rights claimed by the Indian community was extended to incorporate such issues like education, Indian marriages, representation in councils and boards, problems of labourers and small planters, cremation rights, Indian public holidays and the end of the indenture system. A number of these rights were considered the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry of 1909. The constitutional reform and the recommendation of the Royal Commission Report accelerated the political participation of PIOs in Mauritius. These kinds of change motivated the leader of PIOs to mobilise the masses for further improvement in their socio-economic condition.

2.8.2 Initiatives taken by the Leaders to Create Political Awareness among PIOs

Constitutional provision and improvement of the economic condition of the PIOs encouraged several leaders to initiate the movement for improvement in the socio-economic profile of PIOs in Mauritius. The early political movement in Mauritius was started by the white planters of French origin. These planters were demanding

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80 Benedict, n.45, p 30.
a say in the functioning of the Government of Mauritius. The leader of the planters, Andrien d'Epinay, vigorously campaigned for a representative body, which enjoyed certain powers in the governance of Mauritius. As a result, in 1832, the council of Government was formed, which besides officials made a provision for non-official members nominated by the governor.

After the issue of the abolition of slavery, the matter relating to Indian immigration and treatment of PIOs was the important issue of confrontation between the colonial administration and planters. The big influx of Indian labourers and their bad working conditions generated controversies. The first person who took up the cause of the Indian labourers was Adolf de Plevitz. He vigorously opposed the system of double cut and the most hated pass system. He drafted a petition of the demands of Indian labourers, highlighting their repression, secured 9,410 signatures and sent it to the governor. He was physically assaulted and publicly scorned by white planters for acting against the interests of his own community. His protests led to the appointment of a Royal Commission in 1872. In the early 1900s participation of Indian origin leaders began, in which Manilall Doctor contribution was pioneering with regard to establishing political awareness among the PIOs.81

Manilall’s actively increased the political consciousness of PIOs and sought to bridge the gap between the merchant class and the indentured labourers. One important result of his work which had been ignored so far was that it gave a fresh cultural dimension to Indian political consciousness. Dr. X. Nalletamby was criticized on the grounds of his Christian religion and western education. Dr. Sakir was opposed by one group of Muslims because he did not speak the mother tongue

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that is, Hindustani, Gujarati and other dialects and was not seen or known to follow
the rites or pray at mosques. He married a Christian and his children had Christian
names, and he enjoyed no popularity at all in ranks. The cultural and other
religious activities initiated by Manilall Doctor and others increased the political
consciousness among the PIOs. It was difficult to ascertain, but during this period
some Hindu and Muslim groups were some times seen asking for some
representative in Council. But there were also Hindu and Muslim groups that
sought a representative from their own religious ranks. The Hindu Young Men
Association and the Arya Samaj were formed to promote educational, religious and
cultural activities, but eventually provoked divisive tendencies that led to the
creation of caste associations such as Bramhan Sabha and Ksastriya Sabha. In spite
of these intended outcomes, however, the work of Manilall Doctor among PIOs
marked a significant advance in the political field. In the words of the colonial
secretary, Bower, Manilall had "sought to instill into the minds of PIOs ideas and
grievances which did not exist before, apart from bringing to light well-grounded
grievances."

The political orientation of the Indian community was the long-term impact of
Manilall Doctors work on the relationship between the PIOs and the coloureds. For
several decades the coloured leadership had been relatively more sympathetic
towards the PIOs for a variety of reasons, despite the fact that they too subscribed
to the policy of assimilating PIOs. But Manilall Doctors work was marked more
for formal end of the policy of assimilation than for the number of measures
conceded by the colonial administration acknowledging the Indian cultural

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82 Raj Mathur, Indians and Politics 1834-1934 in U.Bissoondoyal, Indians Overseas-The
83 Ibid., p.333.
identity. Nevertheless in 1907, Action Liberale, a party that was predominantly coloured, was supported by Manilall Doctor for the setting up of a Commission of Inquiry on the sugar industry. The success of this Indo-Creole alliance in obtaining the Inquiry Commission encouraged them to maintain the alliance for the 1911 elections. The elections proved a success at political mobilisation and a perceptive observer like Governor Boyle commented “for the first time in my experience an attempt has been made to embroil the Indian population in the internal dispute of the Creole population.”

The success of Manilall Doctor in defeating the policy of assimilation by pleas in favour of Indian languages and religions, and even the attachment of Mauritius to India, was a turning point in the relationship between the PIOs and coloured. At the 1911 elections, Action Liberal was defeated; shortly after, the Alliance was disbanded and the stage was set for the Retrocession movement. Inevitably, the Retrocession campaign with a press particularly abusive to the PIOs, led the latter to campaign vigorously against the Retrocessionists.

In 1901, a newspaper reported that PIOs would have voted for the coloured candidate had not Sauzier made use of the Indian planters dependence on him for credit ratoons and the milling of cane to influence their votes. The retrocession movement destroyed the good feelings and sympathy, which oppressed classes felt for each other even when cultural barriers persisted. There was a serious conflict between the Creoles and PIOs on the question of retrocession which was not to be lightly treated. Consequently a solitary vote of the PIOs ensured the defeat of the

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84 Hazareesingh, n.21, pp.57-70.
85 The retrocession movement was aimed primarily at returning Mauritians to France where a more democratic regime with universal suffrage would have enabled the coloureds to come to power as was the case in the neighboring French island of Reunion. But at the same time the coloureds wanted to put an end to what they perceived to be the Indianization of Mauritius.
Retrocessionists. Commenting on the election results the governor said “The conspicuous part played in the election by the PIOs electorate who undoubtently voted with very rare exception anti retrocessionist. They were the first elections in which an Indian candidate obtained considerable support. At Grand Port, 231 votes were obtained by Mr. Boodhum in the first election and 260 in the by-election. Thus, the PIOs electorate were suddenly made to realise the political power which they had hitherto allowed to lie dormant and a few of the more educated among them, doubtless influenced by communication from India, had recently set to work to develop this influence. The Indian electorate had established itself as an independent third force in politics and were based in the rural areas. The merchant class lost its leadership role to which it had aspired, but nevertheless largely supported the new leadership. At the National level, the age-old conflict between white and coloureds threatened to become a triangular contest based on colour race, religion, language and culture, social and political factors. While this policy was not motivated by class relations yet, in the particular racial and cultural milieu of Mauritius, race, religion, language and culture influence political and social behaviour could not be accorded a secondary status in the action and motivation of individuals. In 1925, when E. Nairac proposed the revision of the constitution, the governor explained that, the origin of the movement must be ascribed to a determination on the part of the coloureds or the Creole element to counteract the increasing political power of the PIOs in whom it was alleged, particularist sentiment and racial aspirations were now being fostered and organised. This comment was not far from the mark for, in 1925, two Indian candidates were elected for the first time. In the 1931 elections the oligarchy reacted and ensured
the defeat of all the Indian candidates and it was not until 1948 that PIOs would again be elected.86

The political emancipation of the Indian masses came with the formation of the Mauritian Labour Party by Dr Cure, Pandit Sahadeo, Hassenjee and Jeetoo among others. It was the Labour Party, which provided the structures for the mobilisation of the Indo-Mauritian masses. It was the Labour Party through its trade unions, the General strikes of 1937 and 1938 which sensitised the working class, the labourers, the small planters and the dockers to their political rights. The Mauritian Labour Party was helped in its task by the Bissoondoyal brothers-Basdeo and Sookdeo—who held intensive socio-religious and political meetings in the rural areas where the Indo-Mauritians largely lived and worked. It was through these activities that the Indian masses became politically conscious. Ramgoolam also played an important role; he visited all the villages and all the sugar estates where he talked to the workers. The Labour Party and the Bissoondoyal brothers together fought for constitutional changes, the extension of vote to the labourers and small planters. The constitutional changes came in 1947 when, for the first time ever, the vote was extended to all those who could pass a simple literacy test in any of the approved languages of the colony, namely, the oriental languages, Gujrati, Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Telegu, and as well as Creole, French and English. Any one who could read or write simple sentence in any of these languages could vote in 1947. The details of post 1947 political development and the process of political assertion of PIOs are discussed in the subsequent chapter.

The political reform brought about in 1885 did not establish any democratic rule: it merely consolidated the hold of the planters and merchants over the government of

86 Ibid., pp.332-334.
the colony. At the time when the Indians came in 1834, Mauritius was governed by
the constitutional instruments of 1831, according to which there was a Council of
Government i.e. legislative council made up of 15 members. The governor as
president, 7 ex-officio members i.e. people who, by virtue of their position in the
civil service, the colonial treasurer, the colonial secretary, would be automatically
entitled to a seat in the legislature. So there were 7 ex-officio members and 7
members chosen from amongst the planters and merchants of the colony. The
planters and merchants, on paper, did not have a majority; it was 7 local planters
and merchants against 7 ex-officio members mostly British heads of department,
plus the governor as president. But in practice the economic interest of British
officials coincided with those of the planters and merchants and therefore the
planters and merchants could use their influence on the Council of Government to
pass the repressive legislations. When PIOs first came to Mauritius no change was
made to the constitution of 1831, in fact the constitution of 1831 remained in force
until 1885. No representative was chosen from amongst the Indian population to
defend their interests. There was a protector in the Council of Government but he
did not offer any protection to the PIOs. Therefore the PIOs were without any
representative to protect their interest. The majority of the members chosen from
the plantocracy and from among the merchants belonged to one community, the
Franco-Mauritian aristocracy. There was no conflict of interest between the
governor and the ex-officio members, planters and merchants. From 1830’s to
1880’s there was connivance and collusion between the Mauritian planters and
merchants and the British officials. The British officials had acquired a lot of
interest in the country. They controlled the import and export business in the 19th
century for a long period. Thus, there was a clash of interest. A serious clash
between the ex-officio members and the Mauritian planters and merchants occurred in 1882. The clash occurred over an ordinance passed following the recommendation of Mr. Thompson, a forestry expert. The ordinance stipulated that a strip of land 150 ft wide on either side of river banks should be kept clear of any cane cultivation. This was done to protect the water supply, but inevitably, it meant stripping the planters of a lot of cultivable land. The disagreement was so serious that one of the member-planters shouted in the midst of the Council debate. The planters then started a movement for self-government. Which was the first such movement for self-government. They started it first by asking for a partially elective legislature. They sent a petition to Queen Victoria: this was the origin of the great reform movement, a movement to introduce elective institutions in Mauritius.\textsuperscript{87}

2.8.3. Dynamics of Race Based Politics Prior to 1948

The politics of race and ethnicity, it has been witnessed, becomes more prominent during the elections; before that the political awareness among the PIOs was very low. Racial politics had always guaranteed mass support for politicians. Hence, race had become an important factor in the organisation of popular political participation displacing other facts such as class. Race and ethnicity were therefore responsible for the growing conflict—political, social and economic in the multi-cultural Mauritian society. The political parties played an important role in ethnic mobilisation. The cultural and social organisations formed in the early 20th century also played an important role. They helped in organising a platform for the Hindus. Immediately after the publication of the Hooper report in 1938, Sir Bede Clifford began to turn the wheels to put recommendations for political, economic and social

\textsuperscript{87} Mathur, n.78, p.320.
reform into practice. While he made it clear that the official members would look after the labourer's interests, he also appointed 2 representatives of the small planters to the council of governor. Other legislation established a committee of representatives from the estates and the small planters to regulate payment for cane, boundaries of factory areas and transport of cane to mills. To improve communication between the labourers and the estates, Clifford merged the poor law office and the office of the protestor of immigrants into the Labour Department and appointed 6 labour inspectors 4 of whom were Indian to serve as a link between 2 groups. Finally, the council of Government passed the 1938 Labour ordinance, which outlined minimum standards of health and diet for workers and required payment of wages in cash. On paper, it promised improvements, but although the labour ordinance provided the machinery for ameliorating conditions, there was in fact little change: the wheels turned very slowly. The government, anxious not to alienate the planters, only half-heartedly enforced the legislation.\(^\text{88}\)

The industrial association ordinance legalising a limited form of trade unionism was passed in May 1938, and in the next 20 months 1 employers federation and 48 employers associations were registered. By 1943, however, nearly all these associations were dissolved or inactive. The strong trade union move envisaged by the Hooper commission did not emerge. Government employers, employees and the legislation itself were all to blame for this failure. The Government lacked administrators with trade union experience or sympathies. Labour officers, preferred to follow a policy, peace at any price, were reluctant to enforce the legislation and having little interest in the success of the associations, claimed that relation between themselves and their workers were a private matter in which the

\(^{88}\) Ibid., pp.330-338.
government had no right to interfere. The labourers had unrealistically, expected immediate and magnificent results from the legislation and were doomed to be disappointed. With no experience at collective bargaining, and at a further disadvantage because they were not educated, they looked to an unenthusiastic government for advice and help. It was not forthcoming, illegal action still seemed the violence which at last made clear to the government that the labourers needed more than institutions and laws to protect their interests, they needed proof that the government understood and sympathized with their problems and that the attitudes of the owners were changing or being forced to change.

By June 1938, Labour Party leaders had began to question Clifford’s sincerity and motives. Part of the problem stemmed from differing views of the time and differing expectations that always typify relation between interest groups and the government. Cure and Anquetil complained that Clifford was moving too slowly; Clifford justified this delay by saying that he had to cope with pressure from estate owners. From the governor’s dispatches, however, it is clear that he did not respect the labour leaders and was not eager to see their influence increase, for he was convinced that they were more interested in personal prestige than the material needs of the workers.

By the middle of 1938, Anquitil, the only labour representative with union experience, withdrew his support of the labour department, objecting to the inadequacies of the legislation which did not permit a real trade union since it prohibited island wide organisations and reckoned that associations be limited to certain industries. Because of the seasonal nature of employment in the sugar industry, most workers were automatically unemployed from December to July. Moreover, no person could be a member of more than one Association, and since
one labour often worked on many parts of the island during the crop season, Anquitil believed he should be eligible to join more than one association. Above all, Cure and Anquitil objected to the fact that four of the labour inspectors, although they were Indian, came from the elite and had stood aloof during the 1937 strikes. Clifford, whom Anquitil and Cure had welcomed enthusiastically to Mauritius, soon became their greatest opponent.

Each segment of the Indian community contributed in one way or another towards placing the PIOs on the political map of the island. Despite the economic and social mobility of PIOs, various obstacles hindered their political development. The external influences were crucial in accelerating political awareness and mobilisation. On the other hand the conflict of races built on local politics, by creating an unbridgeable gulf between white and coloured, served to enhance the importance of the entire Indian electorate after 1885. However it also destroyed the prospects of a political alliance, which cut across race and culture and this failure had further enmeshed race and culture with politics in the future of the island. The major political development after the universal adult franchise is discussed in the subsequent chapter. The chapter also discusses the process through which PIOs asserted themselves in the social, political and economic affairs of Mauritius.