CHAPTER – 3

STATUS AND IDENTITY OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN SEYCHELLES (1945-2005)

The present chapter deals with status and identity of Indians in Seychelles. The Indian community in Seychelles too provides a fascinating case study as up till now the Indian community was fully assimilated with the Seychellois society and culture, however, now they are rediscovering their identity as Indians. The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part will give a brief background of Seychelles’ geography, economy and society. It will also discuss the French and British colonial rule and the present political scenario. The image of Indian diaspora under the French and British colonial rule and the economic life of Indian diaspora is discussed in the second part. The current socio-political and economic status is taken up in the third part while the question of Assimilation and identity is discussed in the fourth part.

3.1 A Brief Background of Seychelles’s Economy, Society and Polity

3.1.1 Geographical Background

Seychelles is located in the Indian Ocean about 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) east of Kenya. The nation is an archipelago of 115 tropical islands with two distinct collections of islands, some comprised of granite and others of coral. The Mahe Group consists of 42 granite islands, all within a 56-kilometer (35-mi.) radius of the main island of Mahe. These islands are rocky, and most have a narrow coastal stripe and a central range of hills rising as high as 914 meters (3,000 ft.). Mahe is the largest island and is the site of Victoria, the capital. The coral islands are flat with elevated coral reefs at different stages of formation. They have no fresh water; human life can be sustained on them only with difficulty.¹

The climate is equable and healthy, although quite humid, as the islands are small and subject to marine influences. The temperature varies little throughout the year. Temperatures on Mahe vary from 24°C to 29.9°C (75°F-85°F), and rainfall ranges from 288 centimeters (90 in.) annually at Victoria to 355 centimeters (140 in.) on the mountain.

¹ Seychelles physical and Social geography. www.europaworld.com
slopes. Precipitation is somewhat less on the other islands. During the coolest months, July and August, the temperature drops to as low as 70°F. The southeast trade winds blow regularly from May to November, and this is the most pleasant time of the year. The hot months are from December to April, with higher humidity. March and April are the hottest months, but the temperature seldom exceeds 88°F. Most of the islands lie outside the cyclone belt, so high winds are rare.²

At independence in June 1976, the Aldabra Islands, the Farquhar group and Desroches (combined area 28.5 sq km or 11 sq miles), part of the British Indian ocean territories since 1965, were reunited with the Seychelles, thus restoring the land area to 308 sq km (119 sq miles). Including, the Aldabra lagoon, the country's area is 455 sq km (175.8 sq miles)³

The islands take their name from the Vicomte Moreau de Sechelles, Controller-General of Finance in the reign of Louis XV of France. Victoria, the capital of Seychelles and the only port of archipelago, is on Mahe. It is the only town in Seychelles of any size and had a population of 24,324 (including suburbs)

3.1.2 Seychelles Economy

Seychelles is a prosperous country in the African context. The GDP per capita is approximately US$ 10,733 (2007 est)⁴ Since independence in 1976, per capita output has expanded to roughly seven times the old near-subsistence level. Growth has been led by the tourist sector, which employs about 30% of the labour force and provides more than 70% of hard currency earnings, and by tuna fishing. In recent years the government has encouraged foreign investment in order to upgrade hotels and other services. These incentives have given rise to an enormous amount of investment in real estate projects and new (mostly 5 star) resort properties. Hilton, Four Seasons and Banyan Tree are all new entrants to Seychelles. Development projects projected in the hundreds of millions of dollars each are in the beginning stages for Emirates Airlines, Qatar Airlines, Raffles,

³ Ibid.
⁴ http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Seychelles
See also International Monetary Fund. 2008. 'Seychelles: recent Economic Developments. IMF Staff Country Report No. 00/162. Washington
Shangri-La, etc. Other private developments such as Ile Aurore, Per Aquam and Eden Island are projected at over $2 billion.  

At the same time, the government has moved to reduce the dependence on tourism by promoting the development of farming, fishing, small-scale manufacturing and most recently the offshore sector. The vulnerability of the tourist sector was illustrated by the sharp drop in 1991-1992 due largely to the country's significantly overvalued exchange rate and the Gulf War, and once again following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. Other issues facing the government are the curbing of the budget deficit, including the containment of social welfare costs, and further privatisation of public enterprises. The government has a pervasive presence in economic activity, with public enterprises active in petroleum product distribution, insurance (has now been privatized), banking (is being privatized very soon), imports of basic products (now being privatized), telecommunications (4 private ISP/telecom companies), and a wide range of other businesses. Beginning at the turn of the millennium the Seychelles Petroleum Company (SEPEC) started to develop the first fleet of modern Petroleum double-hull tankers (five vessels), which was completed by late 2007/early 2008 with the possibility to build more in the near future. The Seychelles President claims that this has opened the door to a new industry for his country and encouraged economic growth by further removing over-reliance on traditional trades like fisheries and tourism which is now falling rapidly as the country's main income but nevertheless, has experienced significant growth in recent years.

Growth slowed in 1998–2001, due to sluggish tourist and tuna sectors. Also, tight controls on exchange rates and the scarcity of foreign exchange have impaired short-term economic prospects. The black market value of the Seychellois rupee is anywhere from two thirds to one half the official exchange rate. The next few years were also a bit slow due to the worldwide economic downturn and the fear of flying brought on by September 11, 2001. More recently tourism has roared back at a record pace setting successive records in 2006 and again in 2007 for number of visitors. The increased availability of

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5 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_Seychelles
flights to and from the archipelago due in part to new entrants Emirates and Qatar airlines is also beginning to show. New 5 star properties and the devaluation of the currency by nearly 33% by the Seychelles Government is having a positive influence on the tourism sector as well.9

Both at official exchange rates and at purchasing power parity (PPP), Seychelles remains the richest territory in Africa in terms of GDP per capita (US$9,440.095 at real exchange rates and US$17,560.062 at PPP 2008 estimate)10, Contrary to what was cited before in terms of the wealthiest African state, it is misleading to compare the Seychelles economy to the Indian Ocean island of Reunion which is part of France, economically dependent on the French income and budget and has the Euro as currency). The Seychelles is a totally independent state generating its own income. Because of economic contraction (the economy declined by about 2% in 2004 and 2005 and lost another 1.4% in 2006 according to the IMF) the country was moving downwards in terms of per capita income; however, the economy came roaring back in 2007, growing by 5.3% due in part to the record tourism numbers but also the booming building and offshore industries which also continue to set records. IMF has forecast further growth in 2008 with continuing increase in the GDP per capita.11

It is important to note that Seychelles is, per capita, the most highly indebted country in the world according to the World Bank, with total public debt around 122.8% of GDP. Approximately two thirds of this debt is owed domestically, with the balance due to multilaterals, bilaterals, and commercial banks. Current external debt is estimated at 35.5% according to the IMF (2007). The country is in arrears to most of its international creditors and has had to resort to pledged commercial debt to continue to be able to borrow. This high debt burden is a direct consequence of the overvalued exchange rate — in essence, the country is living beyond its means, and financing its lifestyle by borrowing domestically and internationally.12

11 Ibid
Seychelles is the smallest nation in the world issuing its own currency (i.e., not pegged to a foreign currency and not shared with any other country).

In October 2008, facing the near-depletion of official foreign exchange reserves, Seychelles defaulted on interest payments due on a $200 million sovereign bond. The government subsequently turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for support, and in an attempt to meet the conditions for a stand-by loan, started to implement a program of radical reforms. The reforms included a fundamental liberalization of the exchange regime, involving the elimination of all foreign exchange controls and a float of the rupee. Following these reforms, the IMF approved a two-year $26 million stand-by loan in mid-November 2008, which represents the Fund’s first ever formal program in Seychelles. It is expected that the IMF’s seal of approval will allow Seychelles to begin formal talks with donors and commercial lenders in its efforts to reschedule its debts.

3.1.3 Seychelles society
3.1.3.1 Population

About 90% of the Seychellois people live on Mahe Island. Most others live on Praslin and La Digue, with the remaining smaller islands either sparsely populated or uninhabited. Most Seychellois are descendants of early French settlers and the African slaves brought to the Seychelles in the 19th century by the British, who freed them from slave ships on the East African coast.

Seychelles has a population of 85,307 (in 2007) out of which males and females are almost equal. (42,900 Males & 41,700 Females) Nearly 25% of the population is under 15 years of age. 74% of the population lives in Mahe; 7.4% in Praslin; 3.3% in La Digue; and the rest are scattered over the remaining inhabited islands. The islanders have a variety of ethnic origin – African European, Indian and Chinese. About 92% of the population over age 15 is literate, and the literacy rate of school-aged children has risen to well over 98%. Increases are expected, as nearly all children of primary school age attend school, and the government encourages adult education.
3.1.3.2 Religion

Some 80 percent of the population was Roman Catholic as of 1992. The initial white settlers in Seychelles were Roman Catholics, and the country has remained so, despite ineffective British efforts to establish Protestantism in the islands during the nineteenth century. The nation has been a bishopric since 1890, and mission schools had a virtual monopoly on education until the government took over such schools in 1944. Sunday masses are well attended, and religious holidays are celebrated throughout the nation both as opportunities for the devout to practice their faith and as social events. Practicing Catholicism, like speaking French, confers a certain status by associating its adherents with the white settlers from France.\(^\text{16}\)

Approximately seven percent of Seychellois are Anglicans--most coming from families converted by missionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Evangelical Protestant churches are active and growing, among them Pentecostals and Seventh Day Adventists. Some two percent of the population are adherents of other faiths, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. No temples or mosques, however, existed on the islands up till 1980s. No restrictions are imposed on religious worship by any of the denominations.\(^\text{17}\)

Although clergy and civil authorities disapprove, many Seychellois see little inconsistency between their orthodox religious observance and belief in magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. It is common to consult a local seer--known as a *bonhomme de bois* or a *bonne femme de bois*--for fortune-telling or to obtain protective amulets or charms, called *gris-gris*, to bring harm to enemies. (Refer to table 3.1)

3.1.3.3 Culture

Seychelles culture is a mixture of French and African (Creole) influences. Creole is the native language of 94% of the people; however, English and French are commonly used. English remains the language of government and commerce.\(^\text{18}\)

\[^{16}\text{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seychelles}\]
\[^{17}\text{http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/6268.htm}\]
Traditionally, despite a greater connection with Great Britain (i.e. in Education, which follows the GCSE and 'A' (advanced) Level curriculum and have a branch of The University of Manchester as one of its highest Educational Institutions and on many aspects of the Law) a British 'Sunday telegraph' travel journalist and many other notable foreign observers has stated that "the culture remains emphatically French" and about 70% of the population have a French sounding Family name, compared with only about 20% English sounding family names, the two are often mixed with the First name, such that you get an English first name and a French family name or vice-versa e.g. Jean-Pierre Kingsmith. Most people are of mixed origins, often of White Europeans with Black Africans where the whites are mainly French and the Blacks are mainly East Africans.

Seychellois society is essentially matriarchal. Mothers tend to be dominant in the household, controlling most current expenditures and looking after the interests of the children. Unwed mothers are the societal norm, and the law requires fathers to support their Children\textsuperscript{19}. Men are important for their earning ability, but their domestic role is relatively peripheral. Older women can usually count on financial support from family members living at home or contributions from the earnings of grown children.

The music of Seychelles is diverse. The folk music of the islands incorporates multiple influences in a syncretic fashion, including English contredanse, polka and mazurka, French folk and pop, sega from Mauritius and Reunion, taarab, soukous and other pan-African genres, and Polynesian, Indian and Arcadian music. A complex form of percussion music called contombley is popular, as is Moutya, a fusion of native folk rhythms with Kenyan benga developed by Ton Pa.

3.1.4 A Brief History

The early (pre-European colonisation) history of Isle de Seychelles – Seychelles is unknown. Polynesians, who eventually settled on Madagascar, perhaps lingered here in circa 200-300 BC.\textsuperscript{20} Arab navigators on trading voyages across the Indian Ocean were probably aware of the islands, although they did not settle them. A manuscript dated AD

\textsuperscript{19} Tartter, Jean R. ‘Status of Women’. \textit{Indian Ocean country studies: Seychelles} 
http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/sctoc.html

851, written by an Arab merchant, refers to the Maldives and higher islands beyond them, possibly Seychelles. Arabs were trading coco der mer nuts, found only in Seychelles, long before European discovery of the islands. The nuts sink in water, so it is unlikely they were found, as the Arabs claimed, washed ashore in the Maldives. 21

In 1502, Vasco da Gama, crossing from India to East Africa, sighted islands which became known as the Amirantes. 22 The granitic islands began to appear on Portuguese charts as the seven sisters

In March 1608, a trading fleet of the English East India Company set sail for India. Lost in a storm, the Ascension's crew saw "high land" on 19 January 1609 and headed for it. They anchored "as in a pond". They found plentiful fresh water, fish, coconuts, birds, turtles and giant tortoises with which to replenish their stores. 23 The Ascension sailed, and reported what they had found, but the British took no action.

Towards the end of the 17th century, pirates arrived in the Indian Ocean from the Caribbean and made a base in Madagascar, from where they preyed upon vessels approaching and leaving the Red Sea and the Gulf.

3.1.4.1 French and British Colonial Rule

The French had occupied the Ile de France (renamed Mauritius by the British in 1810) since 1710. This colony was growing in importance, and in 1735 an energetic administrator, Bertrand Francois de la Bourdonnais (1699-1723) was appointed. His brief was to protect the French sea route to India. La Bourdonnais, himself a sailor, turned his attention to making a speedier passage from Mauritius to India. To this end, in 1742, he sent an expedition under the command of Lazare Picault to accurately chart the islands northeast of Madagascar. 24

On 21st November 1742, the Elisabeth and the Charles anchored off Mahé at Anse Boileau (not Baie Lazare, later mistakenly named as Picault's landing place) 25. They found a land of plenty. In fact, Picault named the island Ile d'Abondonce. Picault's

21 Ibid.
23 Cooper, Fedrick. op.cit. p.34.
mapping was poor, so in 1744 he was sent back and renamed the main island Mahé, and the group the Iles de la Bourdonnais.\textsuperscript{26} He had high hopes for the Iles de la Bourdonnais. However the islands were once more forgotten when Labour donnais was replaced in 1746.

The outbreak of war between England and France reminded the authorities on Mauritius about the islands. Two ships were sent to claim them, commanded by Corneille Nicholas Morphey. He renamed the largest island Isle de Séchelles in honour of Viscount Jean Moreau de Séchelles, Minister of Finance during the reign of Louis XV (later Anglicised as Seychelles). This was later used for the island group, whilst Mahé was again used for the largest granitic island. Morphey took possession for his king and the French East India Company on 1\textsuperscript{st} November 1756.\textsuperscript{27}

The end of the Seven Years War, France's loss of Canada and its status in India, caused the decline of the French East India Company, which had formerly controlled Mauritius. This settlement, and thus Seychelles, now came under direct royal authority. The new intendant of Mauritius, Pierre Poivre (1719-1786),\textsuperscript{28} was determined to break the Dutch monopoly of the lucrative spice trade, he thought Mahé would be perfect for spice cultivation.

In 1768, Nicolas Dufresne arranged a commercial venture, sending ships to collect timber and tortoises from the Seychelles. During this expedition, French sovereignty was extended to cover all the islands of the granitic group on Christmas Day.\textsuperscript{29}

In 1769, the navigators Rochon and Grenier proved that a faster route to India could safely be taken via the Seychelles and thus the importance of Seychelles' strategic position became realised. Meanwhile, Poivre had finally obtained seedlings of nutmeg and clove, and 10,000 nutmeg seeds.\textsuperscript{30} His attempts to propagate them on Mauritius and Bourbon (later Réunion) met with little success and he thought again of Seychelles. It was

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid
\textsuperscript{27} Cooper, Fedrick, \textit{op.cit.} p.56.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p.69.
\textsuperscript{30} Benedict, Burton, \textit{op.cit}, p.9.
considered fortuitous when Brayer du Barré (unknown-1777), arrived on Mauritius with royal permission to run a settlement on St Anne at his own expense.

On 12th August 1770, fifteen white colonists, seven slaves, five Indians and one negress settled on St Anne. Du Barré stayed in Mauritius seeking funds. After reports of initial success, he begged the government for more money. However, reports reached the authorities that ship captains could get no supplies of fresh produce from the islands. Du Barré's appeals for help to Mauritius and Versailles fell on deaf ears. In desperation, he went to the Seychelles to try and rescue the situation, but to no avail. A ruined man, he left for India and died there shortly afterwards. 31

In 1771, Poivre sent Antoine Gillot to Seychelles to establish a spice garden. By August 1772, Du Barré's people had abandoned St Anne and moved to Mahé or returned home. Gillot worked on at Anse Royale, establishing nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon and pepper plants.

When British ships were seen around Seychelles, the authorities were spurred into action, despatching a garrison under Lieutenant de Romainville. They built Etablissement du Roi (Royal Settlement) on the site of modern Victoria. Gillot was nominally in charge of the civilian colonists, but had no real authority over them. Mauritius sent as replacement a man of stronger mettle, Jean Baptiste Philogene de Malavois. He drew up 30 decrees which protected the timber and tortoises. In future, only sound farming techniques and careful husbanding of resources would be tolerated. He assumed command of the settlement in 1788. 32

In 1790, as a result of the French Revolution, the settlers formed a Colonial Assembly, and decided they would run their colony themselves, according to their own constitution. Land in Seychelles should only go to the children of existing colonists, who should dispose of the colony's produce as they chose, not as Mauritius dictated. They deemed the abolition of slavery impossible, because they believed that without free labour, the colony could not survive.

31 Lee, Chirstopher op.cit., p.57.
32 Cooper, Fedrick, op.cit. p.38.
Jean-Baptiste Queau de Quinssy (1748-1827), whose name was later Anglicised to Quincy, took command of the colony in 1794. A wily man, used skill and expediency to steer Seychelles through the years of war ahead. Seychelles acted as a haven for French corsairs (pirates carrying lettres de marque entitling them to prey legally on enemy shipping). Quincy hoped this might go unnoticed, but in 1794 a squadron of three British ships arrived. The British commodore, Henry Newcome, gave Quincy an hour in which to surrender. Through skilful negotiations, Quincy obtained a guarantee of his honour and property and surrendered. The British made no effort to take over the Seychelles; it was considered a waste of resources. The settlers decided that unless they were sent a garrison, they could not be expected to defend the French flag. Therefore they would remain neutral, supplying all comers. The strategy worked. The colony flourished. Quincy's favourable terms of capitulation were renewed seven times during the visits of British ships.

On 11th July, 1801 the French frigate *Chiffonne* arrived with a cargo of French prisoners sent into exile by Napoleon. Then HMS *Sybille* arrived. Quincy had to try to defend the *Chiffonne*, but after a brief battle, the *Chiffonne* was taken. Captain Adam of the *Sybille* wanted to know why Quincy had interfered, in contravention of his capitulation terms. Quincy managed to talk his way out of the difficulty, and even persuaded Adam to agree to Seychelles' vessels flying a flag bearing the words "Seychelles Capitulation", allowing them to pass through the British blockade of Mauritius unmolested.

15th September 1801 was the date of a memorable sea battle just off the settlement. The British ship *Victor* was seriously disabled by damage to her rigging, but she was able to manoeuvre broadside to the French vessel *La Flèche* and rake her with incessant fire. *La Flèche* began to sink. Rather than surrender her, her captain ran her aground, torching her before abandoning ship. The opposing commanders met ashore afterwards, the Englishman warmly congratulating his French counterpart on his courage and skill during the battle.

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The British tightened the blockade on the French Indian Ocean colonies. Réunion surrendered, followed in December 1810 by Mauritius. In April 1811, Captain Beaver arrived in Seychelles on the *Nisus* to announce the preferential terms of Quincy's capitulation should stand, but Seychelles must recognise the terms of the Mauritian surrender. Beaver left behind a Royal Marine, Lieutenant Bartholomew Sullivan, to monitor the Seychelles situation.36

There was little Sullivan could do alone to stop the settlers continuing to provision French frigates and slavers. Slave ownership was not then against British law, although slave trading was. Sullivan, later given the title of Civil Agent, played cat and mouse with the pro-slaver colonists. Once, acting on a tip off, Sullivan was rowed over to Praslin and was able to confiscate a cargo of newly landed slaves. It was but a small triumph amidst many frustrations, and Sullivan, complaining that the Seychellois had "no sense of honour, shame or honesty", resigned.37

The first civilian administrator of the British regime was Edward Madge. He had a bitter feud with Quincy, who remained in the administration as Justice of the Peace. In the following years, the islands became a backwater ticking over quietly. Seychellois landowners had a pleasant life, though making ends meet given the fickle markets for their produce was not always easy. The British had allowed all customary French practices to remain in place. The administrator may have been British, reporting to London, but he governed according to French rules. The biggest grievance the colonists had with their new masters was the colony's dependence on Mauritius.

The other cloud on the planters' horizon was British anti-slavery legislation. In 1835, slavery was completely abolished. The plantations were already in decline, their soils exhausted by years of cultivation without investment in renewing fertility. The plantocracy believed they could not farm without free labour. Some planters took their slaves and left. The liberated slaves had no land, and most squatted on the estates they had tended in bondage, working sporadically to keep themselves from starvation, but generally refusing to work at all. It was a poor sort of freedom, and the colony entered a period of stagnation. There were no exports, and no money to pay for new infrastructure.

The situation was only improved when planters realised they could grow coconuts with less labour and more profit than the traditional crops of cotton, sugar, rice, and maize. Soon, they also had a source of virtually free labour once again. The British took their anti-slavery stance seriously, and operated patrols along the East African coast, raiding Arab dhows transporting slaves to the Middle East. Slaves liberated south of the Equator were brought to Seychelles, and apprenticed to plantation owners. They worked the land in return for rations and wages. Over a period of thirteen years from 1861, around 2,400 men, women and children were brought to Seychelles.38

The town, called Victoria since 1841, began to grow. Licences granted in 1879 give some idea of the range of businesses in the town. There was a druggist, two auctioneers, five retailers, four liquor stores, a notary, an attorney, a jeweller, and a watchmaker.39

There was a disaster on 12 October 1862, when torrential rain and strong winds hit Mahé. An avalanche of mud and rocks fell on the town from the hills. It has been estimated that over 70 persons lost their lives.40

Seychelles yearned to be a colony in its own right, and the authorities in the mother colony supported them. Sir Arthur Gordon, the Mauritian governor, sent a petition on their behalf. Concessions were made, but Seychelles did not become a Crown Colony in its own right until 1903, when its first Governor, Sir Ernest Bickham Sweet-Escott took office. Befitting its new status London, the colony acquired a botanical gardens, and a clock tower in the heart of Victoria.41

The British, like the French before them, saw Seychelles as a useful place to exile troublesome political prisoners. Over the years, Seychelles became a home to prisoners from Zanzibar, Egypt, Cyprus and Palestine, to name but a few. The first in the line of exiles was the ex-Sultan of Perak who arrived in 1875 after his implication in the murder of the British Resident of Perak. Like many of the exiles who followed, he settled well into Seychelles life and became genuinely fond of the islands. He took home with him

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Benedict, Burton. op.cit, p.71.
one of the popular local tunes, and incorporated it into the national anthem of his country. With new words, it later became the national anthem of Malaysia.

Perhaps the most famous of the political prisoners was Archbishop Makarios, who arrived in 1956. He likewise fell in love with his prison. "When our ship leaves harbour," he wrote, "we shall take with us many good and kindly memories of the Seychelles...may God bless them all."

World War I caused great hardship in the islands. Ships could not bring in essential goods, nor take away exports. Wages fell; prices soared by 150 percent. Many turned to crime and the prisons were bursting. Joining the Seychelles Labour Contingent, formed at the request of General Smuts, seemed to offer an escape. It was no easy option however. The force, 800 strong, was sent to East Africa. After just five months, so many had died from dysentery, malaria and beriberi. The corps was sent home. In all, 335 men died.42

By the end of the World War I, the population of Seychelles was 24,000, and they were feeling neglected by Whitehall. There was agitation from the newly formed Planters Association for greater representation in the governance of Seychelles affairs. After 1929 a more liberal flow of funds was ensured by the Colonial Development Act, but it was a time of economic depression; the price of copra was falling and so were wages. Workers petitioned the government about their poor working conditions and the burden of tax they had to bear. Governor Sir Arthur Grimble instigated some reforms, exempting lower income groups from taxation. He was keen to create model housing and distribute smallholdings for the landless. Many of this reforms were not approved until World War II had broken out, and everything was put on hold.43

The Planters Association lobbied for the white land owners, but until 1937 those who worked for them had no voice. The League of Coloured Peoples was formed to demand a minimum wage, a wage tribunal and free health care for all. During World War II, a seaplane depot was established on St Anne to monitor regional shipping. A garrison was stationed in the islands and a battery built at Pointe Conan to protect the harbour. Some 2,000 Seychellois men served in the Pioneer Companies, in Egypt, Palestine and Italy.

At home, Seychelles had turmoil of its own. The first political party, the Taxpayers Association, was formed in 1939. A British governor described it as "the embodiment of every reactionary force in Seychelles", and it was entirely concerned with protecting the interests of the plantocracy. After the war, they also benefited by being granted the vote, which was limited to literate property owners; just 2,000 in a population of 36,000. At the first elections in 1948, most of those elected to the Legislative Council were predictably members of the Planters and Taxpayers Association.

In 1958, the French bought back the Glorioso islands from the Seychelles.  

It was not until 1964 that any new political movements were created. In that year, the Seychelles People's United Party (SPUP) was formed. Led by France Albert Rene, they campaigned for independence from Britain. James Mancham's Seychelles Democratic Party (SDP), created the same year, by contrast wanted closer integration with Britain.  

In March 1970, colonial and political representatives of Seychelles met in London for a constitutional convention, with the Seychelles Democratic Party (SDP) of James Mancham advocating closer integration with the UK, and the Seychelles People's United Party (SPUP) of France-Albert René advocating independence. Elections in November 1970 brought a new constitution into effect, with Mancham as Chief Minister. Further elections were held in April 1974, in which both major political parties campaigned for independence. Following this election, negotiations with the British resulted in an agreement under which the Seychelles became an independent republic within the Commonwealth on June 29, 1976. The newly knighted Sir James Mancham became the country's first President, with René as Prime Minister. These negotiations also restored the islands of Aldabra, Farquhar, and Des Roches, which had been transferred from Seychelles in November 1965 to form part of the new British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), to Seychelles upon independence.

3.1.5 Independence and After

On June 5, 1977, a coup d'état saw Mancham deposed while overseas, and France-Albert

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44 Ibid. p.55

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René became President. The Seychelles became a one-party state, with the SPUP becoming the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF).  

In 1981, the country experienced a failed coup attempt by Mike Hoare and a team of South African backed mercenaries. John Perkins has alleged that this was part of a covert action to re-install the pro-American former president in the face of concerns about United States access to its military bases in Diego Garcia.

The government was threatened again by an army mutiny in August 1982, but it was quelled after 2 days when loyal troops, reinforced by Tanzanian forces, recaptured rebel-held installations.

In 1984 after the assassination of the exile Leader in London Mr Gerrard Houreau, The Seychelles community in Exile put together a programm titled SIROP - Seychelles International Repatriation and Onward Programm involving the Alliance, , DP and SNP(Seychelles National Party). it required the exile to negotiate a peaceful return supported by a strong economic programm. This program had very important international support. It was linked to political process, events of change in Poland - the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance COMECON, Fall of Berlin Wall, Germany reunification and changes in USSR. Also, important political change in South Africa and Organization for African Unity (OAU).

At an Extraordinary Congress of the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF) on December 4, 1991, President Rene announced a return to the multiparty system of government after almost 16 years of one-party rule. On December 27, 1991, the Constitution of Seychelles was amended to allow for the registration of political parties. Among the exiles returning to Seychelles was James Mancham, who returned in April 1992 to revive his party, the Democratic Party (DP). By the end of that month, eight political parties had registered to contest the first stage of the transition process: election to the constitutional commission, which took place on July 23-26, 1992.

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48 Ibid
49 Ibid, p.3845
The constitutional commission was made up of 22 elected members, 14 from the SPPF and 8 from the DP. It commenced work on August 27, 1992 with both President Rene and Mancham calling for national reconciliation and consensus on a new democratic constitution. A consensus text was agreed upon on May 7, 1993, and a referendum to approve it was called for June 15-18. The draft was approved with 73.9% of the electorate in favor of it and 24.1% against.

July 23-26, 1993 saw the first multiparty presidential and legislative elections held under the new constitution, as well as a resounding victory for President Rene. Three political groups contested the elections—the SPPF, the DP, and the United Opposition (UO)—a coalition of three smaller political parties, including Parti Seselwa. Two other smaller opposition parties threw in their lot with the DP. All participating parties and international observer groups accepted the results as "free and fair."\(^{51}\)

Three candidates contested the March 20-22, 1998 presidential election—Albert Rene, SPPF; James Mancham, DP; and Wavel Ramkalawan—and once again President Rene and his SPPF party won a landslide victory. The President's popularity in elections jumped to 66.6% in 1998 from 59.5% in 1993, while the SPPF garnered 61.7% of the total votes cast in the 1998 National Assembly election, compared to 56.5% in 1993.\(^{52}\)

In April 2004, Rene retired as President passing the office to his Vice President, James Michel. At the next Presidential election in July 2006, James Michel polled 53.7% of valid votes, Wavel Ramkalawan 45.7% and Phillip Boulle 0.6%. In the May 2007 National Assembly elections, Seychelles People's Progressive Front took 56.2% of votes and Seychelles National Party in coalition with Seychelles Democratic Party took 43.8%. This gave SPPF 18 directly elected seats plus 5 nominated, total 23 seats with the SNP/DP coalition taking 7 directly elected plus 4 nominated, total 11 seats.\(^{53}\)

### 3.2 Indian Diaspora under the Colonial Rule
#### 3.2.1 Migration of Indians

The Indians constitute seven percent of the total population of Seychelles. The Seychelles

\(^{51}\) Ibid
\(^{52}\) Ibid.
\(^{53}\) [http://africanhistory.about.com/od/seychelles/p/SeychellesHist2.htm](http://africanhistory.about.com/od/seychelles/p/SeychellesHist2.htm)
was first settled in 1770 with 28 colonialists from *Isle de France*. They brought five Indians with them. These early arrivals were not slaves as such; indeed, so small was settlement that every individual was valued. The French colonialists brought slaves from India, originally from Malabar coast. That is why, even today, in Seychelles, Indians are known as ‘Malabars’.

During the same period, increasing number of free immigrants arrived from Pondicherry, chiefly masons and carpenters. British took over the island in 1814 and when slavery was abolished in 1830s, the demand for labourers was met through contract system. The development of cash crop cultivation led to increase of demand of labourers. Contract labourers went from India to work overseas in 1828.

Merchants and other service migrants followed this ebb and flow of population growth. Tamils, in particular, established themselves in wholesale and retail trade from the mid 19th century onwards including some families who moved to the island from Mauritius. Female immigration progressed slowly.

Tamils constitute the largest groups. The most prominent were the *nattukotai chettiars*, *Chuliars*. Tamil traders from Pondicherry used to visit Seychellers for the purpose of timber trade followed by settlements of Tamils from Tamil Nadu for trading purposes. Among the traders from other region were the Muslim trading communities of Dawoodi Bohras who migrated from Surat in 1850s and Khojas who migrated from Kutch. The number of Indian migrants increased subsequently by ‘chain migration’ – where migrants sponsor, urge and assist kin, partners and co-villagers to migrate to the same destination.

These migrations took place in the larger setting marked by critical changes in the world economy and the increased integration of the economies of Africa in to the global capitalist system. The advances in transportation gave a further impetus to the process.

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56 Ibid.
3.2.2 *Image of Indians in Colonial Rule*

The experience of Indians in Seychelles, is different from PIOs in other countries in two respects: Firstly, there was no indigenous population when Indians first arrived in Seychelles and Indian group was relatively small. The population of Seychelles was so small that each and every Indian was valued. However, this is not to say that they were better off.

Indians played an important role in the creation of Seychellois society and they imported alongside Africans to serve as slave labour. Colonial Rulers recognized this. The importation of labour continued even after abolition of slavery and change of the rule from French hands to the British.

A number of skilled free immigrants also arrived from India as they were cheaper to employ than Europeans, and agreement signed with Pondicherry artisans led to the establishment of a wealthy, free, Malabar class on the island by the late 18th century. The crews of sailing ships were also sourced from India – most of them were Muslims. To this day, the term ‘Malabar’ and ‘Lascar’ are local slang for Hindus and Muslims respectively.

Some Indians held high position during the colonial rule. The first Tamil, Ramalingam from Réunion, came to Seychelles in 1789 as an advisor to the Governor and was endowed with large areas of land for his services. Therefore, Indians were viewed as important assets for the colonial rule.

3.2.3 *Economic Life of Indian Diaspora under the Colonial Rule.*

Before 1838, most Indians worked on white-owned estates as slaves, producing cotton, coconut oil, spices, coffee, and sugar cane, as well as sufficient food crops to support the population. After the abolition of slavery and when British took over they became agricultural wage labourers, share croppers, fishers or artisans settling up in quarters where they lived.\(^{57}\)

The British did little to improve the economic plight of the islanders. Even when they officially took them from French, they had no great interest in them. The first demonstration of this was in the 19th century when the Government in London went through some diplomatic antics to hand them back to the French in exchange for France's territorial claims in India but in spite of contrived negotiations by British, the French were not stupid. The message was quite clear: now you have taken them, keep them, we have enough problems of our own. The only reason for taking possession in the first place was to destroy the island's potential as a military facility for the French during the Nepoleonic wars. Instead of settling down to the task of converting the island to yet another little corner of England, the administrators allowed Seychelles to continue with its French Identity.58

The Indian excurses to the Seychelles took place under oppressive conditions. The origins of what came to be known as the system of indentured labour. Having been 'emancipated', many African ex-slaves declared their unwillingness to work for the daily wage that their employers offered. Since, there were no longer an intensive, reliable and cheap supply of labour, the plantation owners turned to India. By 1830s the larger part of India had fallen under British rule, and it is the confluence of British interests economic and political in Seychelles and India that explains the ease with which the British Government of India permitted the transplantation of Indians, drawn entirely from the peasantry, to alien lands, thousands of miles way. Peasants were lured to the city by agents who promised them relief from the misery of their lives and substantial gain, and many were kidnapped or otherwise tricked. These agreements were initially bound to serve five years, it being understood that he planters would pay for their passage, and at the end of this term the indentured labourers were to receive their freedom. If they wished to do so, they could return to India at the expense of their employer, or they could settle in their homeland, and gain rights accorded to free men. The British almost never adhered to these agreements.59

Upon arrival the migrants were medically examined to assess their suitability as agricultural workers. This examination often proved in effectual. All were issued with clothing that bore no resemblance to what they usually wore. Social restrictions and

taboos began to dissolve. The migrant found himself in the midst of strangers of different castes whose appearance language and social habits often seemed foreign and wrong.

3.3 Present Economic Status

People of Indian Origin are well represented in all economic sectors of Seychelles: Transport and construction, vegetable trade, higher education and professional positions. Throughout their history in Seychelles, a high proportion of Indians, Gujaratis and Tamils traders, have been involved in retail trade including hawking or running fruit and grocery shops and later supermarkets. The Gujaratis established fruit and vegetable businesses and general stores. Many PIOs setup grocery stores in the expanding suburbs. These businesses relied heavily on female and family labour.60

Rising real estate prices in 1980s enabled some of them to go in for construction business. It also enabled them to use family landholdings as collateral to secure loans for business ventures in small-scale manufacturing and artisan enterprises, but also as retailers and contract service providers. These ventures were sometimes assisted by the Indian tendency to pool family resources, though some sibling rivalry and internal squabbling also existed. The offspring of these families followed their parents into business, but some opted for professional careers. 61

The children of migrants have reversed the downward mobility and excelled in professions such as doctors, lawyers, accountants and engineers. At the same time rising educational achievements among Indians (most of them go for higher education in France) saw growing numbers of Indian graduates entering teaching profession and competing state employment. 62

Thus, Indian community has done well in education and other sectors of the economy and particularly in self employment. The Indian community has a substantial presence and diverse spread in this beautiful island country. Many of them are occupying important positions in Seychelles contributing substantially to the development and prosperity of

62 Based on personal interview with Suresh Vishwakarma, Principal Engineer, Public utilities corporation, Victoria, Mahe, Seychelles.
this country. It is a matter of great pride that the Indians here are respected and loved by
the local people and there has been a great degree of cross cultural fertilization over the
two hundred odd years since the first batch of Indians arrived reached these islands.

Large construction companies owned by Seychellois of Indian origin employ hundreds of
construction workers mainly from Gujarat. There are also a significant number of Indians
from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Their area of control is retail
trade and construction. About half a dozen of these companies, employing a large number
of people, have garnered most of the major building projects in the country. The PIOs are
mainly in education and health and hold key positions in major private enterprises. There
is also strength of white collar workers in hotels, banks, financial set ups, parasatal bodies
– hospitals and ministries. Dr. V. Ramadoss, an Indian physician and advisor to the
President of Seychelles was conferred with the Pravasi Bhartiya Samman in 2006. His
upright conduct has contributed to boosting India’s image in the island, as he has been
involved in the various philanthropic activities and has raised substantial funds for
disaster victims of Gujarat earthquake and for Kargil war. He has taken great interest in
developing ties in the field of business and medicine between Seychelles and India and by
his own initiatives opened the doors for Seychelles patients, including dignitaries to visit
India for medical treatment. Dr. Ramadoss is recognized for his multifaceted
achievements in the field of medicine and philanthropy and in boosting India’s image
abroad.63

Thus, from trading in rural areas to managing modern corporate sector in urban
competitive environment, the role of the Indian business community can hardly be
underestimated in Seychelles in general. Many Indians are heading banks, airlines,
consultancy firms, IT companies besides being the core professionals like doctors,
engineers and architects and well-versed with accountancy, pharmacy and business
management practices. Their economic strength and professional achievements have
begun to exert their voice and influence in politics, culture, business and the social life of
the Island. They are the important source of capital financing in the manufacturing and
construction activities. The Indian trader, besides performing its usual role of supplier of
goods, has also been engaged in supply of high and middle level manpower resources for

industrial projects. In short, their contribution and achievements have been of a high order. While starting initially at the lower rungs of the economic ladder, they rapidly climbed up the hill top. In the phase of liberalisation and privatisation of the Seychellois during 1990s, the Indian entrepreneurs have carved a new role for them and show all the needed attributes to manage modern corporate sector to grow regionally and globally in tune with the needs and aspirations of local economies. To achieve and gain respectability in alien land, launching of educational facilities was one of the main contributory factors of success of second and third generation PIOs.64

People of Indian Origin are one of the largest share holders in the revenues of Seychelles as they pay taxes in various forms. They are bringing technological advancement in the country and most importantly they are one of the biggest employers of local population. As employers Indians are often more employee friendly and humanistic in nature than their counterparts.65

3.4 Present Socio-political Status

Indians in Seychelles enjoy an equal political status viz-a-viz other communities. PIOs in Seychelles are politically quite active. Indians contest elections. An example of this is the presidential candidate of Seychelles National Party - Wavel Ramkalawan. He is a person of Indian origin. Wavel Ramkalawan was born in Mahé, the principal island of Seychelles66.

It was his work as a priest that led Wavel Ramkalawan to politics. Through his pastoral work, he came into contact with many people who had been the subject of harassment, victimization, imprisonment or other negative actions because of their opposition, real or perceived, to the one-party state, or simply because their activities or those of family members had aroused the suspicion of the authorities. It was this that compelled him to speak out against the repression and abuses of human and civil liberties for which the government was directly responsible. At that time, the church was the only institution which could speak out on these issues.67

64 Based on Persona interview with Mr. Srinivasan, Secretary, The Hindu Council of Seychelles. March 2009.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid
67 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wavel_Ramkalawan
In 1990, Ramkalawan preached a landmark sermon, broadcast to the nation on the national radio station, in which he questioned the practices of the one-party government and gave voice to the desire of the people for greater freedom, respect for human rights and observance of the rule of law in the country. The sermon was an inspiration for the movement for political liberty and democracy in Seychelles. It drew Ramkalawan closer into politics. In 1991, still a priest, he joined others who had been active in opposing the government, such as Roger Mancienne and Jean-Francois Ferrari, to form Party Seselwa, initially an underground organization, and became its leader.68

When the government, under pressure both internally and from abroad, returned the country to multi-party democracy in 1992, Party Seselwa was the first political party to register and join the ranks of others in opposition to the government. It immediately set to work and participated in elections for representation on the 1992 constitutional commission, unfortunately polling only 4% of the national vote and not qualifying for representation on the commission. Subsequently to the coming into force of the new constitution in 1993, two other opposition parties joined Parti Seselwa to form The United Opposition (UO) and contest the 1993 general elections. The party won 9% of the vote, enabling it to appoint one member to the National Assembly. Wavel Ramkalawan became that member and distinguished himself during his five-year tenure both for his brilliant oratory and toughness as a lone member in a politically-charged arena. He was responsible for bringing to the attention of the House numerous failings of the government and for proposing many actions, which were subsequently taken up.69

In 1998, Ramkalawan led his party into the second multi-party general elections. The party polled 27% of the national vote and increased its National Assembly representation to three, beating the Democratic Party of former President James Man cham into third place. Ramkalawan became the first directly-elected member of the party in the Assembly, winning his home constituency of St Louis, which he has represented continuously since. In addition, he was elected Leader of the Opposition, a post he continues to hold.

68 Ibid
69 http://www.snpseychelles.sc/
The 2001 presidential elections, in which the choice was between the incumbent of 26 years and Ramkalawan, showed increased national support for Ramkalawan who polled 45% of the vote as against 54% for President Rene. The next year, Ramkalawan led his party, now renamed the Seychelles National Party (SNP), into the National Assembly elections. The party increased its parliamentary representation from one directly elected member to seven and from two proportionally elected members to four.

Since 1998, Ramkalawan has been a strong and loyal voice as Leader of the Opposition. He has spoken on all the national issues and not shirked from tackling controversial matters and speaking out against abuse and waste. In that, he has proved himself as a person worthy of leading the country in its next stage of development. In 2005, Ramkalawan took a sabbatical from his clerical duties in order to consecrate himself fully to his political life at a crucial and important point in the country's affairs. In the 2006 Presidential elections, Ramkalawan lost an unprecedented fourth time, this time to James Michel who remains President to this day.  

Ramakhilavan's popularity was such that he got only eight percent votes less than the winning candidate James Michel of Seychelles People's Progressives Front.  

Despite the presence of Indo-Seychellois, their impact on the culture of the island has not been as predominant as could be expected. Indian culture has lived along with other cultures but is gradually giving way to a mixed Seychellois culture, which retains more of French customs, habit and common law, than of any other outside influence, even of British who ruled for over 150 years. This is however, not true of Indians alone but also of all other communities that came to settle on the island from time to time.

Indian community in Seychelles enjoy an equal social status viz-aviz other communities. PIOs in Seychelles are not a hated community. They are on the Island since its origin. PIOs have almost been completely assimilated themselves with the society and culture of Seychelles.  

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70 Ibid.  
71 Refer to table 3.2  
72 Based on personal interview with Suresh Vishwakarma, Principal Engineer, Public utilities corporation, Victoria, Mahe, Seychelles
Caste identity has remained insignificant for many generations of PIOs and some of the meanings of castes have been re-evaluated in different historical and social context. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and during the twentieth century many castes sought to consolidate and enhance their economic and social status.

Varna system has had little direct relevance to the meaning of caste to Indians in Seychelles. Identification is more with as more defined caste or sub-caste jati – these centre very much on kinship and village, and are affirmed through marriage negotiations. Individuals would try to secure the best possible marriage for their children, not usually into higher or different jati but into family of high status or ‘good standing’.

3.5 Assimilation and reassertion of Identity

It is true that People of Indian origin do not form a separate community in Seychelles. All communities have submerged into a single entity, the Seychellois. However, even in this multi-racial Seychellois society, French culture, language and mannerism have come to predominate. Why is this so and how this has happened?

Unlike Britain, France has always followed the policy of assimilation in their colonies. French ruled their colonies as extension of their empire. Under this policy the subject population was to be fully acculturated in the mainstream French culture in terms of language and culture. French influence is clearly seen in its ex-colonies and Seychelles is no exception. The French learned early that their colonies would last longer if they worked to become friends with the people of their colonies. France therefore never left its colonies even after formal independence was granted to them. Seychelles was ceded to Britain in 1814, still French presence can be seen not only in government’s policies and the economy but also on the people of these countries.

An important provision when French handed over Seychelles to Britain was that the conquering power would “respect and preserve” the customs and laws of the people of the island. Because of this provision, to which British faithfully adhered during their entire

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid
76 Ibid
colonial period, French Laws, customs and culture have always been absorbed in Seychelles.

Despite the presence of Indo – Seychellois, their impact on the culture and economy of the island has not been as predominant as could be expected. Indian culture has lived along with other cultures but gradually gave way to a mixed Seychellois culture, which retains more of French customs, habit and common law, than of any other outside influence, even of the British who ruled for over 150 Years

This is however, not true of Indians alone but also of all other communities that came to settle on the island from time to time. The Seychellois culture is essentially Seychellois, with an inevitable French accent. The Separate identities have been diluted, in course of time, in the totality of Seychellois society.

3.5.1 Marriage

Marriage is not endogamous. It is not compulsory to marry within the Indian community. Caste identity has remained insignificant for many generations of PIOs. Varna system has had little direct relevance to the meaning to the meaning of caste to Indians in Seychelles. Identification is more with as more defined caste or sub-caste jati – these centre very much on kinship and village, and are affirmed through marriage negotiations. Individuals would try to secure the best possible marriage for their children, not usually into higher or different jati but into family of high status or ‘good standing’. 77

However, during the last decade, there is a renewed trend among the Indian community in Seychelles (especially Tamils) to marry in India. They are coming to their state of origin for marriage. Indian wives are preferred as against earlier preference for Seychellois wife. 78

3.5.2 Language, Food and Taste

Indian community in Seychelles, in course of their assimilation process has lost its Language. Creole is spoken at home and is also language of work. They also speak

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77 Based on Personal Interview with Pranav Mukhopadahya, Former High Commissioner of India
78 Ibid
English. But Indian languages are not spoken. Even in Food and Tastes, Indian community in Seychelles has adapted French cuisine and ways and manners. 79

3.5.3 Education

PIOs in Seychelles acquire high education. Greater tertiary education among the Indians in Seychelles, accounted for the shift to management, professional and technical positions. The rising educational achievements among Indians (most of them go for higher education in France) saw growing number of Indians graduates entering the teaching profession and also in bureaucracy.

3.5.4 Rituals, Religious Festivals

Indian community in Seychelles was up till 1980 fully assimilated in Seychellois culture. In the 1980’s, however, there was renewed interest of Indians, especially Tamils in establishing religious and cultural centres. In 1901 there were 332 Tamil-Hindu families out of a population of 19,237 and now there are about 3500 Tamil speaking people.

For 222 years Tamils have had a continuous and uninterrupted history in this island. For 300 or more years they have had a history in this region comprising of Seychelles, Mauritius, Reunion and South Africa. Even though fellow Tamils in other settlements in this region established centres of cultural and religious significance for themselves, Seychellois Tamils did not establish any such centre. Their cultural thirst and religious needs were satisfied through periodical visits to their native Tamilnadu. Attempts were made to hold cultural festivals when Tamils assembled and celebrated their days of cultural importance. However, the absence of an established centre made these efforts intermittent.

*Taippoosam*, a Hindu religious day dedicated to Lord *Murugan* whose abode is usually the hills and mountains, is celebrated annually on a large scale in South India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, Reunion, South Africa and in all other places where there

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79 Based on Personal Interview with Prof. S.N. Malakar, Jawaharlal Nehru University.
are temples for Lord Murugan. Lord Murugan, the warrior god with a vel (spear) in his hand, is regarded as the destroyer of evil and the preserver of the good.80

The Hindu population of Seychelles numbering a few thousands, although yearning to have a common place of worship to call their own, could not organise themselves to translate their desires into a reality. There were a few abortive attempts. Hindus sought private premises to give vent to their spiritual feelings and aspirations. It was only in 1984 that an expatriate enthused a few Hindus who intuitively thought that the time had come to establish a religio-cultural centre for Hindus.81 The group worked with missionary zeal and convinced conflicting opinion-holders into streamlining their thoughts and deeds towards building up a coherent association, which became the Seychelles Hindu Kovil Sangam.

The main purpose of the S.H.K.S was to build a temple to cater to the spiritual and cultural needs of the Hindu population. The dormant energies of all the Hindus sprouted spontaneously through the newly formed organization to buy land in the heart of Victoria and build a full-fledged Hindu temple in traditional architecture within a short span of eight years by May 1992.82 It was nothing but providential that the Arulmigu Navasakti Vinayagar temple stands as a living monument of what united effort could achieve. It is a worthy gift for generations to come in this beautiful island.

The organization of the Seychelles Hindu Kovil Sangam in 1984 and the consecration of the Navasakti Vinayagar Temple in May 1992 were landmarks for the resurgence of Tamil cultural activities apart from the religious awakening. The Kovil Sangam became the rallying base for all the Tamils and Hindus for the promotion of Tamil culture in this country. Active participation in Tamil classes, debates, dramas and other cultural events including Tamil publications has increased over the years. This temple combines a cultural institution with a holy home for religious needs. It fills a void, rectifying a long-standing defect, by facilitating an emotional need to help in nation building. The temple provides a religious base and the presence of the priests encouraged a religious

80 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism_in_Seychelles
81 http://www.tamilnation.org/diaspora/seychelles.htm
82 http://www.murugan.org/research/seychelles.htm
awakening such that religious rites and ceremonies have been on the increase in many Hindu homes in Seychelles.

The *Arulmigu Navasakti Vinayagar* Temple, the first and the only Hindu temple in Seychelles, has Lord *Ganesha* as the presiding deity. Since 1999 Lord *Ganesha* is taken out along the outer courtyard on *Vinayagar Chathurti* day amid great pomp and pageantry. Apart from the presiding deity, icons of Lord *Murugan*, Lord *Nadarajah*, Goddess *Durga*, *Sreenivasa Perumal*, *Bhairawa* and *Chandekeswarar* are enshrined in the inner *mandapam* of the temple. Appropriate prayers, pujas and festivals are performed for the different deities on special occasions. 83

*Taippoosam Kavadi* Festival, which started in 1993 in Seychelles in the inner courtyard of the temple, is now conducted in the outer courtyard and a chariot *kavadi* is also taken out in procession. This festival has gained popularity as a national festival, so much so, that as from 1998 the Government has declared it to be a holiday for Hindus. 84

The annual *Taippoosam Kavadi* Festival since 1993 has enlarged itself in quantity and quality into a visible and powerful assertion of Hindu identity and a forceful expression of Hindu solidarity in the multi-racial and multi-cultural Seychelles. Moreover, the *Kavadi* Festival with a high degree of participation and involvement reveals the inter-religious understanding that promotes religious and communal harmony in the heterogeneous society of the present world.

 Tradition has it that Lord *Murugan* married *Valli*, one of his two consorts, on this *Taippoosam* day and therefore it is considered a special day for celebrations. Hindu deities have animals and birds as their vehicle and peacock is the vehicle for Lord *Murugan*. Hence the metal frame of which the *kavadi* is made is fully decorated with peacock feathers that are blue in colour – philosophically blue is the colour of the sky and the ocean – suggesting the colour of the universe. 85

*Kavadi*, the central wooden beam represents the human body while the two pots hanging on either side represent the good deeds done in one’s true life on one side and the evil on

83 http://tamilcommunityblog.wordpress.com/2008/05/15/the-tamil-diaspora/  
84 Ibid  
85 Ibid
the other side. Carrying this on his shoulders, the devotee appeals to the Lord for forgiveness for his evil deeds and blessings for the good deeds. Certain devotees in order to show their willingness to offer themselves in the name and service of God in the form of penance and austerity, carry the symbol of Lord Murugan with Vel-shaped pins pierced all over their body to show their tolerance to suffering inflicted in the name of God. In turn this prayer is symbolic of the willingness of the person to suffer for others out of humility and humbleness towards the Lord and one’s fellow human beings.86

Silver or steel vel in many sizes are pierced into through skin, back, cheeks and tongue of the kavadi-carrying devotees, signifying that the vel destroys all the desires and evils in man and purifies him to be a noble soul. The carrying of the kavadi with all these rituals is a process of purifying the soul. The piercing by these sharp pins and skewers is an art by itself done only by expert hands.87 The will power, concentration and piety of the devotee are such that no pain is evident and it is strange that not a single drop of blood may be seen. An experienced hand could only perform this exercise of piercing and a specialist in this field is always brought from India to do this job.

The music troupe brought from Tamilnadu, consisting of nadaswaram and tavil, forms an important part of the procession. No Hindu function, religious or social, is complete without this musical troupe. They not only provide appropriate music for the kavadi procession but also contribute in no small measure for the easy piercing of the skewers and pins into the body. The musical notes and the vibrations produced also have a soothing effect thus avoiding pain.88

Murugan represents the bliss and beauty of nature. He is the aesthetic symbol of Tamil culture linked to dance and song. Kavadi songs and dances along with the uproar of "Vel! Vel!" in chorus from the devotees underlines Tamil identity and the Kavadi Festival procession provides cultural feast for the eyes of Seychelles residents of all communities.

The first Kavadi Festival in Seychelles in 1993, a year after the consecration of the temple, had six pal kavadi carrying male devotees and ten pal kudam carrying female devotees with the event held inside the inner courtyard of the temple away from public

86 http://www.murugan.org/research/seychelles.htm
87 http://www.seychellesweekly.com/August%201,%202008/page15.html
88 Ibid
view. In contrast, in 1999 there were twenty-one *pal kudam* carrying females, nineteen *pal kavadi* carrying males, ten *alagu kavadis* and the innovative chariot kavadi leading the procession along the public highway to the accompaniment of tavil and nadaswaram players specially flown from India for the occasion. Crowds always enthusiastically watch this with awe and admiration.

Kavadi can be in many forms such as dancing kavadi, musical kavadi, alagu kavadi or flying kavadi, but the innovative one in Seychelles is the chariot kavadi in which a miniature of the chariot that is used for deities is pulled by a devotee who at the same time carries the alagu kavadi with silver skewers pierced all over his body. It is the strong will, determination and absolute piety preceded by many days of fasting and pure vegetarian diet that helps one to endure this difficult vow.

As a matter of tradition, the *kavadi* festival concludes with *annadanam*, a common lunch for all. The common lunch that winds up the proceedings has a laudable philosophy behind it. It is the noble principle of *care* and *share* that is in practice. For through *annadanam*, everybody irrespective of their status in society is cared for equally and whatever is available is shared by all. All sit down together for the common meal. This high philosophy is common to all religions and, if practised in the true spirit, the world would become a happy place to live peacefully for all.89

The Seychelles Hindu *Kovil Sangam* over this short span of seventeen years has successfully established and entrenched some strong foundations for the preservation, consolidation and further flowering of Hindu-Tamil culture in this paradise island of Seychelles. The ever-popular *kavadi* festival and special Hindu festivals are covered in Tamil and English in the national media and wide coverage of such events over national radio and television are worthy of appreciation. The *Sangam* may be proud of having published six souvenir booklets on the temple, two compilations of devotional hymns and four annual religious calendars, all for free distribution. For the annual consecration the national daily "The Seychelles Nation" in Tamil and English publishes a special commemorative supplement.90

89 Ibid
90 Ibid
Since June 1999 the Sangam utilizes a fortnightly radio time of fifteen minutes every Friday evening to broadcast talks and devotional songs on Hindu faith courtesy of the Government of Seychelles.91

Finally, for one of the national day celebrations in June the Sangam had a traditional illuminated "Car Ratham" in the float procession of thirty, which not only won great applause and appreciation but also was placed first with a handsome award. Considered together, these activities suggest that there is Tamil-Hindu cultural flowering in the multi-lingual, multi-religious paradise island of Seychelles.

3.6 Conclusion

Indians came to Seychelles not as slaves but were among the early arrivals. The experience of Indians in Seychelles is different from PIOs in other countries in two respects. First, there was no indigenous population when Indians first arrived in Seychelles and second, the Indian group was relatively very small. The population of Seychelles was so small that each and every individual was valued. However, this is not to say that they were better off. For well over 200 years the Indian Diaspora in Seychelles became integrated with the local population resulting in inter-marriages and some conversions also. They became well versed in the local Creole language also. They own a large number of business houses. People of Indian Origin are well represented in all economic sectors of Seychelles: Transport and construction, vegetable trade, higher education and professional positions. In the course of this development their traditional values including language, religion and culture took a back seat in the land of their settlement. The inter-mingling of races -- British, French, African and Asian -- and mixed marriages without barrier of colour created a multi-faceted and almost unparalleled community, a peaceful community that is a good example for other countries. It is true that People of Indian Origin do not form a separate community in Seychelles. All communities have submerged into a single entity. The separate identities have been diluted, in course of time, in the totality of Seychellois society. In the 1980's, however, there was renewed interest of Indians, especially Tamils in establishing religious and cultural centres.

91 Ibid
### TABLE 3.1
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENT RELIGION IN SEYCHELLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Percentage of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>82.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican Church</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh Day Adventist</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** [http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/6268.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/6268.htm)

### TABLE 3.2
SUMMARY OF THE 28-30 JULY 2006 SEYCHELLES PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates - Parties</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Michel - Seychelles People's Progressive Front</td>
<td>30,119</td>
<td>53.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wavel Ramkalawan - Seychelles National Party</td>
<td>25,626</td>
<td>45.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippe Boullé</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (turnout 88.7%)</strong></td>
<td>56,059</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>