Chapter: 3

DETERMINANTS OF TRANSFORMATION FROM INDENTURED WORKERS TO PIO

Malbar res malbar- Once a Hindu, always a Hindu -Creole proverb.

3.1. Theorising Ethnic Identity

In order to understand the determinants of the transformation of the Indian indentured identity, it will be imperative to contextualize what ethnic identity according to different scholars.

3.1.1. Max Weber

Max Weber, in his Society and Economy argued that "The belief in group affinity, regardless of whether it has any objective foundation, can have important consequences especially for the formation of a political community. We shall call "ethnic groups" those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of custom or both, or because of the memories of colonisation and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. ... Ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organised that inspires the belief in common ethnicity". ¹ Driedger further argues that, the loyalty of the French Canadians toward the English polity is today determined above all by the deep antipathy against the economic and social structure, and the way of life, of the neighbouring United

States; hence membership in the Dominion of Canada appears as a guarantee of their own traditions.²

3:1:2. Dashefsky

Dashefsky believes that Group identification is "a generalised attitude involving a personal attachment to a group and a positive orientation toward being a member of a group. Therefore, ethnic identification takes place when the group in question is one with whom the individual believes he has a common ancestry based on shared individual characteristics and/or shared socio-cultural experiences".³

Two conceptually important qualities of ethnic identity emerge from Weber’s definition. First, ethnicity is a subjective phenomenon. Though it may strongly correlate with ‘objective’ phenotypic traits, ethnicity is fundamentally different from race. Phenotypic racial features are objectively rooted within individual bodies, while ethnicity is a subjective identification that attaches individual personalities to external systems of shared values and symbolic representations. Ethnicity then is contextually and subjectively defined, which makes it fluid, malleable and difficult to measure with precise quantitative indicators. Ethnicity is also an inter-subjective phenomenon that has both inclusive and exclusive dimensions. Discussing the ethnicity of a single individual in isolation makes as much sense as does listening to “the sound from one hand clapping”.⁴ Ethnic identity, like most aspects of individual personality, comes into being only through assertion against others which is perhaps prevalent in Réunion after 1980’s. It acquires meaning in individuals’ inter-subjective encounters with co-ethnics and ethnic others. In co-ethnic encounters, ethnicity has inclusive binding properties and "becomes a powerful identity merging the individual with the group.⁵ By contrast, encounters with people from different ethnic groups reveal the exclusive element of ethnic identity. An act of inclusion implicitly presupposes an act of exclusion; ethnic identification operates

by excluding non-members as others who do not belong within a bounded universe of shared meaning. Though encounters with ethnic others certainly do not have to end in conflict, they are qualitatively different from co-ethnic interactions.

Taken together, ethnicity’s inclusive and exclusive dimensions generate both intra-ethnic cohesion and particularistic friction in plural societies. Theorists have long disputed the sources of ethnic identification. Debates between primordialists, who interpret ethnicity as an affective, primitive force, and instrumentalists, who see ethnic identification as an economically rational strategy, have ended in a theoretical impasse. Despite intensive theoretical treatment, ethnicity remains as inscrutable as ever. Though there are some sociologists who claim to have reached some unanimity on the issue, Yet the origin of ethnic identification is an intellectually interesting question. All Historians and sociologist alike seem to concur, however, that ethnicity “rests upon a singularly potent set of symbolic resources,” and that it “operates in a fluid and changing way in the political arena”. Furthermore, whether or not they spring from an affective, primordial genesis, ethnic groups provide certain benefits to their members and can be seen as utility maximizing actors.

Regardless of its origins, ethnicity exists, and it’s subjective and inter-subjective properties influence economic behavior and economic development. With increased specialization and division of labour—that is, with increased differentiation of the role system of a given society-status aggregates may become a manifold of attribute and role designations, a situation which greatly complicates the work of the social analyst and which explains in part the fondness of some social scientists for so-called simpler societies without highly developed role systems. Culture consists of those shared ways in which life, activities and the world make sense. Society is that perceived social environment to which an individual define themselves morally and to which they

---

7 Ibid, p.11.
differentiate themselves from others. The issue of defining the concept of culture and society is a very relative term. The relationship between different forms of discourse in societies marked by a plurality of traditions can therefore be regarded as a political struggle between different versions of the world. Some such versions may be "muted" and will then fail to surface.10

3:1:4. Hylland Eriksen

There are different levels and different degrees of both society and culture. In some societies, it is necessary that the inhabitants have very much in common in order for the society to continue to fulfill their needs and to continue to exist without changing profoundly. In such societies, the favourite laboratories for anthropologists, system boundaries, both social and cultural, can apparently be delineated easily. In the societies where Hylland studies of the Cultural integration in Trinidad and Tobago, He finds, "any such delineation is in some sense arbitrary."11

3.1.4.1. The Assimilation Mobility

The assimilation-mobility theory asserts that so long as ethnic groups exhibit high levels of social cohesion, they will continue to possess distinctive cultures (values, beliefs, norms, and attitudes) and exhibit distinctive behavioral patterns. The more socially cohesive an ethnic group, the more distinctive the cultural and behavioral patterns of its members. When group cohesion begins to break down, group culture and behavior become progressively less distinctive until they become indistinguishable from those of the larger society. Two possibly interrelated processes are said to accelerate the assimilating ethnic’s social and cultural integration into the social mainstream. Greater social contact with individuals outside one's own ethnic group leads to new value cues and social pressure to conform to an alternative behavior pattern. Not wishing to be out of step with their new social intimates, many assimilating ethnics forsake their old values

11 Ibid.
and behaviors for new, more "American" ones. The second process is mobility - economic, social and residential. Almost all immigrant groups to the United States have begun their American existence at the bottom of the socioeconomic stratification system. Socioeconomic mobility, or the acquisition of greater material wealth and more prestigious occupational status, brings the ethnic into contact with middle- and upper-class people who, according to the assimilation theorists, serve as the chief conveyors of dominant social norms. Upwardly mobile ethnics confront such agents of Americanization in the workplace, new residential neighbourhoods, and new organizations and social situations. Thus, when individuals engage in closer social contact with people of different ethnic (racial, religious and/or national) characteristics, and especially when such contact is coupled with upward socioeconomic mobility, mainstream cultural and behavioral patterns are likely to prevail. This trend can also be said to be true of Indian indentured workers situation in Réunion particularly after the introduction of DOM, where every individual can fathom the economic and social benefits arising out of the system thereby subsuming themselves to the dominant French culture.

3.1.5. Robert Dahl

Nowhere are the political manifestations of this assimilation-mobility thesis more clearly stated than in Robert Dahl's who govern? Dahl introduces the concept of political assimilation, arguing that "ethnic politics. . . is clearly a transitional phenomenon." Ethnic groups, he claims, go through three stages en route to political oblivion. First the group exhibits a high degree of political homogeneity, shown by "similarity in political attitude, and . . . a pronounced tendency toward voting alike." He attributes it to low levels of social assimilation and lack of economic mobility. "Political homogeneity," he says, "is a function of socioeconomic homogeneity".

---

14 Ibid, p.34.
15 Ibid, p.35.
16 Ibid.
By the third stage, the ethnic group is socially and economically heterogeneous. Large segments have been assimilated and are economically mobile. Politically too the group is now heterogeneous as a result of disintegrating ethnic social cohesion (assimilation) and upward socioeconomic mobility (middle-class status). The new ethnic middle class has adopted a new culture and life style at the same time that it eschews intimate social contact with lower-status ethnics. The political ramifications of this process are predictable: "To these people, ethnic politics is often embarrassing or meaningless. Political attitudes and loyalties have become a function of socioeconomic characteristics. Members of the group display little political homogeneity".  

3.2. Determinants of transformation

The Following are the major determinants of the transformation of Indian indentured workers to that of a People of Indian Origins (PIOs).

1. Citizenship.
2. Religious institution.
3. Acculturation on Language.
5. French institution notably School
6. The Economic factor and
7. Separation of state from Religion.

3.2.1. French Citizenship

Prior to the Nationality law of 1889, all the Indian indentured were British India subject in Réunion Island. However, by the Nationality Law of 1889, around 48 Indian indentured benefited from this law and notably after 1920, Indian indentured workers becomes a Frenchmen, this marks the historic transformation of Indian identity in the

\[17 \text{ Ibid.}\]
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

Island.\textsuperscript{18} Though the law declare that a person born in Réunion Island ‘\textit{irrevocably Français}’ there was a lot of complication and bureaucratic hurdles between the British India government and the French government in Réunion Island. This bureaucratic hurdle was the main reason that prevented Indian indentured workers from acquiring French citizenship till 1920.

\subsection*{3.2.2. Religious Institutions}

With the inception of the indentured system in La Réunion, the catholic missionaries along with the planters’ played important role in imposing catholic traditions and beliefs on the PIOs. In La Réunion, each of the early arrivals - at the insistence of their employer/owners and the government administration - took on Christian names and had their children baptized in the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{19} However, they did not abandon Hinduism in the process and to this day it is common for the Indians, to attend Catholic mass and confession, yet this did not prevent them from visiting Hindu temple.\textsuperscript{20} The very unique feature of the island form of belief is that, "It is the way it is here,"\textsuperscript{21} the local lay Hindu priests say. "If you believed in both religions then God will look at you twice." You have double protection said one of the local teachers retired from Piton St.Leu. The Hindus also worship the "\textit{Black Virgin}," which is a blend of Goddess Kali and Virgin Mary. On the other hand, the Catholics are disturbed by the fact that majority of the Hindu of adoring all the saints as various forms of God and not embracing the idea of Christ's supremacy. The state's official government religious listing gives 700,000 Catholics, 50,000 Muslims and 30,000 Buddhists of Chinese origin, no mention of Hindus is made. According to the government official records in La Reunion, there is not a single Hindu in Reunion-even though 30 percent\textsuperscript{22} of the islands' is of Indian descent.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Immigration report 1901, Para 18. Cited in Dept of Revenue and Agricultural, \textit{Emigration Branch}, December 1902, ProsNo.4&5, Part A.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Some of the most common Indian Baptised name in La Reunion are Alexis, Francois, Jean, Marie, Nicole or Huguette.
\item \textsuperscript{21} This concept was developed by Ghassarian, that though outwardly Christian yet whenever any important decision is taken they always choose to follow the Hindu path.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Though the French government did not allow Census based on ethnic lines yet it is assumed that PIOs, Black and the white constitutes 30 percent each and the rest Chinese.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Indians in Reunion are popularly known as "Tamouls," since majority of PIOs in the island are from South India, but the term Tamoul is a synonymous to "Hindu" in local parlance.  

3.2.2.1. Church  

Under the joint pressure of the church and their employers, PIOs in La Réunion were obliged to learn the Christian religion, to go to church, to wear French clothes and to give Christian names to their children. They have thus adopted the three main Christian rites of the life i.e. baptism, marriage and funeral, as an unavoidable part of life in the island. The indentured workers had to express Christian attitudes to be more accepted-if accepted at all-by their employers and by the society at large. It appears that a Hindu sense of conformity helped them to act properly according to the dominant norms and rules of the host society to their own advantage. This external compliance to the dominant models explains why there is a majority of Christian first names, notably "Marie" and "Jean," among people of Indian descent in the island. For example, the Presidents of the ODI, had a first name Jean Regis and his wife Marianne, however both his sons are given typical Indian name, Shankaran and Rajendran. 

3.2.2.2. The Priest  

Till the late 1980’s the PIOs and their descendants in the island were expected to act as Christians if they did not want to endure God's future and society's present reprisals, it was virtually impossible for them to avoid an outward display of Christianity. Memories of force confession in the church by the church authority and their employees are many and stories highlighting the authoritarian and oppressive behavior of Christian priests.

---

24 Though they were historically called "Malbars" which later was considered a derogatory term referred to PIOs.  
26 Notably the idea that each thing should be assigned its designated place.  
27 Ibid.
Towards PIOs. 28 The Catholic missionaries used all means to convert the indentured workers to their faith, instances like an old man (PIOs) and his co-workers went to the church (under their employer's pressure), and the priest systematically asked them to kneel in front of him and to answer the question whether they were Christians or pagans? A query to which they all responded the same, the answer which were learned before 29: i.e."We are Christians. A Christian is someone who has been baptized, who apply the Christian dogma.... Then, a woman, during her catechism; the priest assigned the children to draw a picture of Christ surrounded by the apostles. She did her best and draws the Christ with three apostles in, what she felt to be, a nice picture. When the priest saw this drawing he angrily took a ruler, asked her to unfold her fingers and badly rapped them, the number of blows corresponding to the missing apostles in her drawing. 30 Such incidents were quite a routine in the island, only ceased to occur in the 1970s and more so after 1980's. Not surprisingly, this type of intimidation has failed to create a strong inner religious commitment rather a negative impression was developed by the PIOs in the island which also deviates from the real teaching of Jesus Christ. It only help them developed an alternate orientation, entailing the integration of external signs of Christian religion and the correct interpretation of social roles linked to it. 31

The Catholic priests constantly pointed out the norms to be followed and adopted. For a very long time, the figure of the priest has been associated with hierarchical authority and punishment. This image, deeply ingrained, explains why, even today, in the majority of families of Indian origin in the island, we find at least one Christian picture prominently displayed in the living room and no Hindu representations. We will see further that it is only since the last few years that these explicit Christian symbols in the household are slowly being replaced by Hindu deities. 32 Though Catholic priests succeeded to a certain extent in their mission, but their success has been partial and mainly external. Practically every person of Indian origin in La Réunion has been baptized, has been to the church.

29 I was told by the local residents of St. Andre, that before they go to the Church they were foretold the question and answer that will be ask.
30 Ghassarian, C (December 1997), Op cit.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid, p.2
and knows some Christian prayers, sometimes better than the white Christian population of the island. Meanwhile, despite their vigorous disapproval from outside, Hindu practices were never abandoned. They have only been relatively hidden by the immigrants to avoid enhancing an already negative perception of them because of their differences. This is why numerous Indian families have erected private temples in their courtyard consisting of oblong stones representing various deities and ancestors, for private usage, allowing them to maintain and express their original belief and traditions.  

3.3. Confluence of Catholic and Hinduism

It was this failure of the employers to respect their workers' rights to practice Hinduism under the terms of the engagement contract that lent the religion a secret, even clandestine, character, though initially agreed when the contract was signed. This situation endured from earliest immigration down till the time when workers were finally allotted plots of land on the plantations to construct temples and officially worship their gods together. Precisely this was a glorious period for the indentured workers when this island ceased to be an alien place for the immigrants. There are several documents and oral traditions that show this small concession given to the indentured workers, Hindu practices, by the white land-owners was yet strongly disapproved of by the church. We can find their lament in some texts that read: "It should be forbidden for Indians to play their drums in the street. This awful music, the incense, their clamor and their dance disturb the entire neighborhood. Their grotesque images, the weird ornaments of their cult express the very sad vision of an open temple close to the church."

When the practice of Hinduism was finally authorised, Christian priests still did everything they could to force the cessation of Hinduism. Ghassarian also narrated that; a priest's sermon in the church of a village where he warned its Christian audience not to be tempted to attend "the religion of walking on fire, of piercing the body with needles," that he defined as "the religion of Satan...." Because of its relative attraction among a
particular category of the population in the island, notably the poorest, like the
descendants of African slaves, Hinduism has rapidly been perceived by catholic priests as
a rival religion. Their only possible recourse in preventing its spread was to create and
diffuse a negative perception of Hindu practices in the Island, said Channemoungam, the
President of Tamij Sangam. Because of its non official character and because of the fact
that its religious practices were practically hidden in the beginning, Hinduism was very
soon associated with some kind of sorcery.36

Thus, it is important to stress that the Tamils' eventual official practice of Hinduism did
not imply the end of the Christian conversion and its social display. On the other hand, it
is also impossible to say that they have really been converted to Christianity. This
religion became above all a matter of mere public display, acted out to satisfy the Island's
dominant culture, those having the political and economic power, and thus demonstrating
their integration into the mainstream of the society.37 This gives a unique colour of being
socially Christian and Hindus in the private spheres.

3.3.1. Local Hindu Priest

Hinduism has been adapted to the new cultural and social context of this French colony
in the Indian Ocean. As there were no Brahmin priests among the Tamil newcomers, the
priestly function was assigned to the workers who knew better than the others the
religious traditions, those who knew how to read and to interpret Tamil sacred books,
those who received a special knowledge through the oral tradition from their elders, etc.
These persons acted like the pujaris in India. They were never full time priests. Despite
some regional variations, as in the villages of Tamil Nadu, the gods' figures are the same
throughout the entire Island. The most powerful figure of folk Hinduism in La Réunion is
the goddess Kali, who requires powerful self-sacrifices and animal offerings. With Kali
are associated Madurai Viran, Muniswaran, and Mariyamma, three powerful deities to
whom devotees address vows. The preliminary invocation of any ceremony if of course

37 Christian Ghassarian, (1994). "Food cultural practices among Tamils in La Réunion (Indian ocean)",
still directed to Ganesh. The other deities invoked, who only receive vegetable offerings, are Shiva and his son Murugan. More occasionally some prayers are addressed to a form of Vishnu: Peroumal. Each Tamil family bas its own family cult (koledeivom) addressed to a special deity. Among the specific expressions of this folk religion in the Island let us mention may be made of fire-walking, the ceremony of kavadee, the animal sacrifices and the priest's ritual of possession by a deity or an ancestor.38

3.3.3. Acculturation

The PIOs of La Réunion indeed offers many interesting examples of maintenance of the fundamental patterns and a rite of Hinduism within the social context of their dominant host society. The ceremonies of walking on fire and Pongol, for instance, have been celebrated at the beginning of the French civil year, when the workers had some rest as result of the post Sugarcane harvest season. The ceremony for the ancestors was also celebrated on the official day of the Christian religion that is during Ail Saint's day. Hindu attitudes associated with birth, marriage and death, although not quite manifest, have been similarly maintained at the same time as Christian practices. Initially most of the Hindu religious ceremonies were celebrated during the winter season probably between Christmas and New Year’s Day, but today they can celebrate Tamil New year with the appropriate months and days.39 Thus the acculturation was systematically carried out through Baptism, marriage, rituals etc.

3.3.3.1. Baptism

As regards to baptism, PIOs have been obliged to officially perform this Christian rite at church, but they have further associated it with Hindu rites and practices performed privately at home, to bring auspiciousness to their child’s life, thus a cultural synchronisation of Christianity and Hinduism occur among the PIOs in La Réunion. Which corresponds to this Christian rite consists in the shaving of the child’s hair, to rid

39 Axel Kichenin, the former Mayor of St.Marie and President of USKIR.He was responsible for introducing holiday for Hindu, Muslim and Blacks in the island during stint as a Mayor.
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

him of his potential bad luck in the future. Moreover, after baptism a baptism name was usually given to PIOs and its ethnic name was chose by their parents in consultation with an eminent astrologer, to give him or an auspicious name.40

3.3.3.2. Marriage

Marriage, till the 1970's was compulsorily performed at the Church as it was mandatory for one to register. However, this marriage ceremony though performed in the church was arranged taking note of the Hindu traditions like choice of the zodiac sign, months date and the hour of the marriage41. Ghassarian argues that “the valorization of the girl's virginity, a strong Indian value, is expressed by wearing a white diadem on her forehead. Among other features that maintain Indian patterns, there is the official encounter of the two families contracting a marriage at the girl's parent's house; the ostentation of a big and prestigious marriage; the fact that the future husband must already possess a house before daring to propose the marriage, etc.”42

3.3.3.3. Funerals

Concerning funerals, all the rite are e publicly performed with the traditions of the Catholic Church and at the cemetery, but they are systematically preceded by Hindu rites in the private space at home.43 Though they were buried in the same cemetery, Hindus however are buried separately on the side of the cemetery.44 Since the dead body first undergoes a Hindu rite at home followed by traditions such as touching of the feet of the dead, throwing of coins, showering flowers and petals and sometime rice in the hole of the grave before the grave is finally sealed, washing of hands and feet with water that looks saffron and fasting performed by the family members of the deceased.45 Unlike in India on these days the mourners wear black clothes which are a clear signs and strong indication of the French assimilation legacy.

43 Ibid.
44 Narrated by Luçay Soubhaya Permalnaick at the site of Piton St.Leu Cemetery, on 7th April 2008.
45 To show that elders are superior and respected in the society and perhaps to ask his/her protection.
3.3.3.1. Ritual

The rite, performed during the official Christian day for the dead in the host society (11 November), falls into two parts: one is public, at the cemetery, and uses the symbols of the Christian religion, such as the flowers and the candles placed on the grave; the other is private and only for the family members, at home, and uses camphor in a Hindu ceremony. Usually the father of the households leads the ceremony and recites the mantras taking the names of all family members, who have been fasting for a week; in the events of the dead of the father the eldest male members in the family performed this function. At the end of this ceremony the meals normally preferred by the deceased, during his lifetime, was placed on the leaves of banana and offered followed by a community feast. Despite the absence of contacts for more than one century between the PIOs in La Réunion and India, the main religious and cultural traits of Hinduism have been observed and conserved with extreme conscientiousness in this island, even in the absence of the full officiating priest.

3.3.3.2. Unique Blend of faith

Through the interaction of these two religions i.e. Catholicism and Hinduism in La Réunion, there emerged a unique blend of faith. The PIOs, though under the French institutions for several decades, could still preserved most of the basic tenets of Hinduism are at the same time influenced by Christianity. However, the overt adoption of Christianity has been a criterion of integration and acceptance across the whole society in La Réunion and the idea that the Hindu gods are the best and the strongest never disappeared. Despite their isolation from India, the disappearance of the Tamil language, the disappearance of the caste system, perhaps its extinction and despite the vigorous anti-Hinduism that was perpetrated by the people who are in authority from the time of the indentured system, PIOs and their descendants have managed to conserved their principal beliefs, rites and practices.

47 Ghassarian, C. (Dec, 1997), Ibid.
Thus one may even speculate that the PIOs particularly the Tamil in this society offers a unique example of the conservation of Hindu practices that are virtually the same as those one could find in South Indian villages in the last century. In spite of the fact that people in the Diaspora generally froze their original traditions to the dominant culture. Therefore Historians like Ghassarian argued that, while it has been adopted, folk Hinduism has been maintained in La Réunion almost as it was in India at the time of the emigration. In fact, the main modifications to Hinduism into this French Island occur in the contemporary society. Paradoxically, what Tamil immigrants and their descendants have been able to preserve for more than one hundred years of indentured settlement on the island, notwithstanding the church disapproval and the compelled involvement in Christianity, is now radically threatened by the new generation of persons of Indian descent themselves, by importing Brahmin priests from Tamil Nadu to officiate in Hindu temples in La Réunion, this new generation is encouraging the adhesion to a new form of Hinduism, defined as the "true" one, in which the worship is principally addressed to called "vegetarian and peaceful gods" (who do not require animal offerings nor priestly possession) like Shiva, Murugan, Vishnu and Ganesh. The president of the Tamij Sangam, also expressed his skepticism that the imported Brahmin priest could revive the caste system. Moreover, the younger generation and some radical Indian association who are involved in this revival are of the opinion that to be more Indian they began to criticised their parents for their complementary practice of Christian religion and began to removed Christian pictures from their own living room, replacing them with Hindu ones. However, the radical changes that this new generation of PIOs in La Réunion wanted to introduce is not as easy for their older generation who for many decades been adapted to this lifestyle and

---

48 Ibid.
49 Offering to these gods do not require animal sacrifice nor priestly possession hence term vegetarian and peaceful.
51 This line of opinion is gaining currency in La Réunion at present because there are some Indian associations who opines that in order to be closer to the motherland they need a priest from India. However, Lucay Camalon, the President of ACRI, lamented that the offering charges taken by the imported priest were exorbitantly higher than the local priest.
52 During my field work in La Reunion at Trois Bassin town, when I entered the house of Marriane, she showed me their private temple constructed in their courtyard and also the portraits of Mary and some Christian saint in the common room.
are not very receptive to this idea of radical change at the present situation, though they believed that Hindu god is the strongest and the best.

Thus as mentioned earlier, PIOs in La Réunion today face an important dilemma emerging from within i.e. "to reform or not to reform their ancestral practices, to adopt or not to adopt a new form of Hinduism that is not of their ancestors and elders that comes from "outside" what is now their society". Moreover, this is the time when they are confronted with western tradition of hygiene that disapproved the Hindu traditions of animal sacrifices, this help to reinvigorate the energy of the youngster who are for radical reformation and spark a wide protest all over the island.

3.4. Clothing

The first adaptation PIOs had to make was in their dress. The French policy of cultural assimilation forced them to adopt new clothing. Very early, Indian women stopped wearing their traditional dress, and men had to wear trousers. I came to learn during my field study in La Réunion that wearing Indian traditional dress was a matter of shame after the introduction of DOM. All the residents in the Island were considered to be liberated from that of French subject to that of a French citizen. Therefore, the Indian nose ring, anklets and toe ring that were considered as an indentured identity were no longer worn. The little dot Indian women place on their forehead, similarly expressing their cultural difference, disappeared as well. Meanwhile, despite these changes, some continuity with Indian traditions can be found since women will not wear any skirt or dress up to the knee, this is true to those who do not intermarry with the Creole since the indentured period.

3.4.1. Significance of colour

There is also a stark contrast during marriage ceremony that expressed in the form of colour. While in India wearing a red sari in marriages that objectify the honor and the

---

Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

virginity of the girl is not digestible to the older generation in La Réunion, the reason being without the white dress and diadem they were accustomed to under the French system, these Christian symbols did not disturb the basic Hindu conceptions of purity and constituted a modified expression of Hinduism. Moreover, in La Réunion, wearing a white western dress had been the norm when going to the temple. Thus white saris are usually worn during Hindu marriages and while going to temple.\textsuperscript{55} Therefore, what is a conventional tradition in India, red saris during marriages, becomes a problematic modernity in La Réunion and, what is the adapted tradition there, white dress at church and at the temple, has an inauspicious character in India and in its practices recently imported to the island, white saris during Hindu marriages or religious ceremonies.\textsuperscript{56}

3.5. Language

Creole was - and still is - a mixed dialect based largely on the French language. It was the product of the verbal interaction between the white landowners and their slaves. However, despite the presence of numerous French words, Creole contains some characteristic words and sometimes a specific syntax. Creole also became the language of the white people who came too late to acquire lands and who had an economic status very close to that of the slave population. Though French was spoken by a small proportion of the population (the upper strata), it was from the beginning the official written language of the society and Creole was the adapted dialect for the lower population. French on the other hand was the language of judicial power and Creole the language of subjection. A crucial characteristic of Creole is that it was a subsequent language largely created from French. This fact still has an imprint on the linguistic and social situation in La Réunion today.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} A white sari in India is worn by a widow and also the white colours are symbolically associated with mourning.
\textsuperscript{56} Ghassarian, C. (Dec, 1997), *Op cit*, p.5.
\textsuperscript{57} Nemo. (1979), "La situation linguistique des minorités ethniques à l'île de La Réunion ", *Etudes créole*. :2(1).
3.5.1. Creole

 Ranked among the lower strata of the population, Indian workers had to learn Creole. It is important to indicate that although it was not the official language, Creole became the most common spoken language of the colony it was the first new language immigrants had to learn. The appropriation of Creole by this new population of Indian descent transformed this dialect as numerous Tamil words were added to the Creole lexicon that already contained words of Malagasy origin. Among the new words was the word Kari, meaning 'meal' in Tamil. The entire population of the Island uses this word today to designate the daily meal based on rice. Since the masking of Indian patterns facilitated incorporation into the society, the use of the Tamil language that was sometimes simply prohibited by the landowners became less and less favoured and was eventually forgotten. This original language has only been maintained by a few people who began to act as priests in the Hindu temples, when the official practice of this religion was ultimately tolerated.

3.5.1.1. Linguistic adjustment

The use of Creole and the loss of Tamil by the immigrants and their descendants is linguistic witness of their adjustment into the dominant social structure. Those who settled in the Island after the completion of their contract became part of the general population. Thus, immigrants' children born on La Réunion were automatically French. Like the majority of the population of the Island, they were French citizens speaking Creole as a first language.

However, the most interesting features about the loss of the Tamil language among the PIOs are that, this loss did not imply the disappearance of Tamil representations forms of speech and practices. These have persisted, especially in the private sphere, even through the media of Creole and to a smaller degree of French. PIOs do still have numerous traditional ways of thinking particularly proverbs and maxims referring to elders and their

Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

advice. Notions such as cleanliness, purity, honour, protection, devotion, auspiciousness, sacrifice, fate, separation, propitiation, the evil eye, dependence and hierarchy are still constantly mentioned or implicitly referred to in daily life. This shows that a specific system of values and ideas can persist outside the context of its original language of expression. Multicultural societies often create this kind of disjuncture between language and culture.

The first half of the twentieth Century saw Chinese and Muslim Guajarati’s who came to the Island as traders. If the circumstances of immigration of these populations differ from that of the African, the Malagasy and the Hindu population, the Chinese and the Guajarati’s still had to speak Creole to accommodate themselves to the host society. Their coming and integration did not change the basic linguistic stratification of colonial society. As for the Hindu population, the second generation, under the pressure of the dominant society they have lost their mother tongue. For almost all the non French immigrants in La Réunion, Creole has been the first language one needs to learn. The loss of the original language among Africans, Malagasy, "Poor Whites" (Petits-Blancs), Tamils, Chinese and Gujaratis is also due to the numerous inter-marriages that occurred from the earliest days on the Island.

3.5.2. French

Historically French has been the official language used notably by the administration and the church. However after 1946, when the status of the Island changed from that of a colony to overseas department, French acquired a new status, it was introduced as a mode of general education. But still French is not spoken by the majority of people at home. It is a second language whose official status only starts when a child goes to school. For most of the population in the Island, Creole, integrated during the first socialisation into

---

the family, is the mother tongue. It is the language of emotion and is used among relatives and during informal interactions outside the household.

3.5.2.1. French as Elite status

Being the official language of this French department, French is not much widespread in the society. It is evident mostly in its written form, it is the language of the law and of everything that implies political power. It is also spoken in administrative arenas, in office work, except among workers in the fields and in the factories, on the radio, on television etc. As French is learnt at school, its mastery demonstrates a level of education. Yet only a small fragment of the population can actually speak it. The ability or the inability to speak French both establishes and expresses stratification in society. Daily interactions and conversations operate with this implicit criterion. This linguistic feature explains why metropolitan French people, visiting the Island or living there, place themselves - and are placed by the native population of La Réunion - in an implicit position of superiority because they speak French fluently. Although this phenomenon is not quite fully and consciously experienced on both sides, it nevertheless operates as a distinctive pattern among people in the Island.

French has been and is still the language of political power. Its usage today places one in a valued position, especially when interacting with someone who does not have a good command over the language. Thus, there are two sections of population using the French language in La Réunion: a small proportion of people from metropolitan France, approximately five percent, who used as a first language or as a mother tongue; and the native Islanders who, with the exception of the very few families of French roots who have owned - and for a great part still own - the lands, and educated families, middle-class and upper middle class, who make a point of speaking French at home, hardly speak French outside the formal contexts in the society. Therefore apart from the above elite class, for the general population, French is a second language although spoken everywhere in the places of power and status in society.

64 Cellier, P. (1985) "Diglossie réunionnaise", Cahiers de Praxématicque:5., Montpellier
Thus French can only be commanded very easily by those school goers since it is a medium of communication and learning. Secondly, It is spoken by people who wanted to stake a higher status in the society, like in India, the elite family who tend to used English with their pets, so is in La Réunion, During my field work, on my way to Troi Bassin, to meet the mayor Roland Ramakistin, I have an opportunity to meet Claire, the most wealthy person in the locality, who command her dog in French, so in general French is spoken only when a person, in La Réunion, want to place themselves in a position of superiority over the other. Speaking French can thus be a matter of prestige among one’s peers, revealing one’s education and status.65 This works for the interaction between native islanders in relation to the metropolitan. However, interaction between people born in metropolitan France is different. Here, the practice of French cannot depict any superiority because it is the first language of communication either at Home or in market. It is important to stress that while visiting this French department or living there, French metropolitans, often do not realise how the practice of French can be a difficult exercise for the natives whom they spontaneously address in French.66

3.5.2.2. French in relation to other Local dialect

In La Réunion, as Creole is close to French, it is relatively difficult for a native from France to speak it, it sounds like speaking a "little French", full' of "mistakes". However, this is not true in all the French overseas colonies. For example Maori in Polynesians' vis à vis Réunion Island, the colonial history of these two societies is quite different: there were people in Tahiti before the coming of the French but there was nobody in La Réunion before the French decided to establish three centuries ago.67 Besides the entire population in La Réunion has its origins outside the Island this explains why the dominant model, that of the colonial and neo-colonial power, is the one that is most valued. A manifestation of the valorisation of the French language and implicitly of French ways can be found in the effort that native middle class people in La Réunion

65 Among others, Pierre Bourdieu has remarkably shown how language can be used to express status (Bourdieu 1991).
66 Who are in a land officially called La France de l'Océan Indien.
67 At least, this is how historians in La Réunion see things until further archaeological evidence.
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

often make to encourage their children to speak French at home, even if they do not manage this language very well and still speak Creole in the family. Thus for people who have learnt Creole during their childhood, French is the language of high status. With the same logic, the use of Creole in public contexts exhibits a certain deficiency.

3.5.2.3. Revival of Creole

Despite this ideological context of putting Français in a superior status, some local intellectuals have, since the seventies, been claiming a specific identity based on Creole and advocating its usage instead of Français in La Réunion. They revalidate Creole by writing about its literature and for some by using it during public gatherings, on television, radio, at the university, etc. Earlier, the only exception where the public use of Creole was not disparaged was in folksongs. These intellectuals fully trained in French and for most of them in France, some of them who teach French literature at the University de La Réunion, began to write novels and poetry in Creole. Their ideological position has progressively justified and revalued the usage of Creole in political discourse. Nevertheless, this usage is still often used as a last resort because too much Creole in a speech could be perceived by the electors as a sign of incompetence.

Thus Creole as a language is used to define a "Creole identity", distinct from that of French. Slowly but steadily today most of the politically conscious local intellectual leaders strongly advocate the use of Creole in school. Meanwhile, it is interesting to notice the fact that, most of people including PIOs do not want their children to receive education in Creole. This very issue expresses the gap between a new generation of intellectuals and the larger population conditioned by the dominant ideology placing

---

68 Armand 1983; Saint-Omer 1990; Marimoutou, J.C. 1992. Some have been working to revalue Creole by writing dictionaries of this language (Baggioni 1987; Armand 1987). Interestingly, they have chosen to transcribe this spoken language in a spelling form that is as distant as possible from the French. Cited in Ghasarian, C.(1988) “Language Strategies in La Reunion "Cahier ,Association for French Language studies,4(3):13.


71 This position is expressed both in private and on radio talk shows on the island.
French above Creole. For most parents, the use of Creole at school would not favour a good educational training and, therefore, the acquisition of a higher status in society.

It should be emphasized here that the contrast of opinion in the Island over the question of the used of French and Creole is not between Creole and metropolitan French speakers but between two categories of Creole speakers: On the one hand, there are those who manage to speak French and advocates Creole as a medium of education in school. On the other hand, there are those who do not speak French very well but sees this language as an avenue for a bettering their social and economic status if not at least for their children.

The attempts to create Creole identity by the intellectual circle fail to strike a common chord with the masses. This attitude, which they thought was the ideal way to express the Islands Creole identity, does not always produce the expected results. The reason being till today most of the employment sectors are directly regulated from metropolitan France, apart from some radio and teaching profession Creole hardly offer any employment to encourage the Island population.

The issue of French having an elite status can be elaborated from the following experience of mine. In St Denis during a dinner conversation in one of the PIOs family, I had the opportunity to meet the Directrice of a Hospital in La Réunion born in France who recently come to the Island. The Directrice in a well manner wishes Christian and his family in Tamil Vanakam. Immediately the landlady instead of replying in Tamil started conversing in French, she believed answering her in Creole or Tamil would have been accepting a position of inferiority, something that would have afflicted her self-esteem even more. Thus the issue of understanding others' social position and motivations during the interaction and trying to assert a superior status can sometimes lead to cultural misunderstandings.

3.6. Schools

The French education in former colonies and overseas is meant for the widespread use of the French language. Here they were more selective and concerned with educating the
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

local elite that could eventually fill the lower ranks of the colonial civil service. There were no colour bars in French schools. The primary concern was to have intelligent children or perhaps children of high-status families who were most likely to become loyal civil servants.72 Almost as soon as it was established in Africa the European type of school was assumed by both colonists and Africans to be one of the keys to economic and political progress. The colonists were particularly interested in its possibilities for training better skilled labour forces, and inculcating within native populations a proper respect for the European interpretation of 'law and order'. Africans, on the other hand, noted the opportunities to learn the secrets of the European knowledge and material success. For a brief period an apparent coincidence of interest between the two groups allowed the early European educators to establish their conception of the formal school relatively smoothly amongst many African communities.73

The State [France] is prepared to support the mission school only in so far as it affords instruction in the French language and develops sentiments of loyalty to France.74 During the first half of the 20th century there a numbers of PIOs who were educated but were mainly from the Muslim community, it was only after 1946 when the Island was regulated by DOM, PIOs most of them began to send their children to school. In La Réunion all educational programmes are regulated by the Ministry of National Education, officially called Ministère de l'éducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherché.

France like in India has a highly organized educational system, which is divided into primary, secondary and tertiary (college) education. Primary and secondary education is usually imparted at public schools although a strong network of private schools also exists and free education is imparted in all Public schools. When the indentured system was abolished in France, PIOs in La Réunion get themselves enrolled in Schools and the medium of instruction, French, was no longer an alien language to them therefore the

system of colonization they undergoes during the indentured period become a boon to them.75

Schooling in France is mandatory as of age 6(six), the first year of primary school while secondary education consists of collège for the first four years after primary school and the lycée for the next three years. The baccalauréat is the end-of-lycée diploma that students must attain and is comparable to British A-Levels and American SATs. Students have a choice of sitting for the baccalauréat général which is divided into 3 streams of study, the baccalauréat technologique or baccalauréat professionnel. Higher education is funded by the state and fees are very low. Students from low-income families can also apply for scholarships. The PIOs also benefitted from all these schemes Academic councils called académies are responsible for supervising all aspects of University education in a given region.77

The Preamble of the French Constitution of 1946 sets out that “the Nation guarantees equal access for children and adults to education, vocational training and culture”. The French education system provides compulsory schooling free of charge for children aged 6 to 16 and a right to education starting at age of 3. With its aim to serve the public, the system adapts to new educational methods, modern technology and users’ expectations, and improves its management by decentralizing power. All these benefits were fathomed by the PIOs after the colony come under DOM. Thus, Assimilation through school education was perhaps the most prominent of the French signposts. Though there are school run by the planters during the indentured period yet it was not well regulated and the planters never encouraged the Indian indentured workers’ childrens’ to go to school. According to French policy, education provided to Africans was meant to make them a part of the French family. Education in Africa has to effect the fusion of the two races.

75 Lucay Soubhaya, a retired primary teacher from Piton St.Leu, Réunion Island.
77 Thomas Lebon, a Journaliste and Photographer, in an email interview, mailed on, 22nd Nov.2008.
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO and also the union of the two cultures. This fusion became an important part of statements concerning policies of France.  

3.7. Economic Factor

The other determinant for the transformation of Indian indentured identity in La Réunion is that of the economic factor, it is always pertinent to emphasize the economic situation of La Réunion at that point of time. Since plantation needs a lot of cheap labour. The colony demanded lots of cheap and strong working force in order to meet the demand of the country’s economic need. During this period, there are a lot Indian people who came as contract workers under the indentured system as well as traders from the early 20th century. However, with the opening of the Suez Channel and the operationalisation of steam vessel, France began to lose it economic influence in the world market, and La Réunion was nearly isolated from the main commercial sea traffic. Therefore, for those of Indian indentured workers who wanted to return after their contract was over waiting for the vessel was sometimes impossible return back to India because there was not enough space in the boat. Whereas there are others who argued that, the Indian indentured labourers were kept intentionally in Réunion by the White masters and perhaps there are those, Indian indentured workers, who had a bad memory of the famine and other social atrocities therefore utilising the saving that they made during the indentured period and now owning land in the middle of St.Denis. All that constraints drove the Indian people to start their new life in Réunion Island and the chance was given to them to acquire the French Nationality with the introduction of the Nationality Law of 1889.

3.8. Separation of Religion from State

After a Civil war in France between the Catholics and Protestants, during the III Republic, the Republic changes the law to take into consideration Protestant. 1905 there

---


79 Firmin Lacpatia, retired Historians narrated this story on 6th April 2008.

80 Sudel Fuma, Chair UNESCO, and a Historian at the Université de La Reunion, narrated this story on the 7th April 2008.
was a complete separation between the Law and the religion. A 1905 law instituted the separation of Church and State and prohibited the government from recognising, funding any religion called: *Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l'État*. The law was based on three principles: the neutrality of the state, the freedom of religious exercise, and public powers related to the church. This law is seen as the backbone of the French principle of laïcité. The law famously states "The Republic neither recognizes, nor salaries, nor subsidizes any religion".¹¹

Religious buildings built prior to 1905 at taxpayers' expense are retained by the local and national government, but may be used at no expense by religious organizations. As a consequence, most Catholic churches are owned by the government. The government, since 1905, has been prohibited from owning any pre-1905 publicly built edifices, and thus religions must build and support all religious buildings at their own expense. Some local governments de facto subsidize prayer rooms as part of greater "cultural associations".²²

### 3.8.1s. Law of 1905

The 1901 and 1905 laws define two categories under which religious groups may register: "associations cultuelles" (associations of worship, which are exempt from certain taxes) and "associations culturelles" (cultural associations, which are not exempt from these taxes). Associations in these two categories are subject to certain management and financial disclosure requirements. An association of worship may organize only religious activities, loosely defined as liturgical services and practices, but no social or diaconal ones. A cultural association may engage in social as well as in profit-making activity. Although a cultural association is not exempt from taxes, it may receive government subsidies for its cultural and educational operations, such as schools. Religious groups normally register under both of these categories; all churches run strictly religious activities through its association of worship and operate a school under

---


²² Christian CADIVEL, a research scholars and President of AJEOL, based at St.Andre La Reunion, in an email on 7th August 2008.
its cultural association. Under the 1905 statute, religious groups must apply with the local prefecture to be recognized as an association of worship and receive tax-exempt status. Thus the law of 1905 gave some respite to PIO's to form their own association and freed them from the pressure of the Catholic Priest.

3.9. Multiple Identities

The most fascinating about the PIOs in the island is issue pertaining to Catholic affiliation and Christian names. I was surprised and amazed when I met the temple secretary of the Mahabhadra Kali Association of St.Pierre, her name Jasmine Amogom pouillé and her husband Mr. Christian, both had a Christian name. In the midst of our discussion Christian, narrated that the issue of multiple identity i.e. having both Catholic and ethnic Indian name had its roots in the French assimilation policy, the powerful local Catholic Church has told Reunionnais that they cannot be separated from the church, that the baptism is permanent. However, while baptism was never required by law, it was more of a ritual before the 1970's to be more acceptable in the society and of significant social event necessary for the family's status in society, said the Christian. And When I asked them about, the possibility for the Hindus to get rid themselves of the imposed Christian names and take up their choice, he lamented that changing one's name under French law requires going before a judge and receiving official permission to do so. Names he said, are most commonly changed because of marriage, but can be altered for other reasons. To do so requires proving an *intérêt légitime*, that is, a legitimate cause warranting a favorable judgment. However, after 1970,s precisely after 1980's it is not necessary for the new born child to adopt a Christian name. This multiple identity is not to negate their cultural linkages to India, though still a loyal citizen of the French Republic.

For example, a representative of the French Consulate in San Francisco who deals with name changes said he felt the judges "will be softer in Réunion" toward Hindus of Indian descent who wish to reclaim their ancestral heritage for religious reasons. He explained the principal reason for the law on names, which dates back to 1791, was to prevent
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

criminals and debtors from hiding their identity. When I personally asked about the above statement that appears in the website, the Temple secretary lamented that this could be another way of legitimising the French policy of Assimilation on the PIOs. In general, French courts have not looked favourably upon changing a French-sounding name back to a foreign name, even when it was the original name of the family. Curiously, one legitimate reason for a change of name is when it indicates a particular national origin, race or religion which everyone knows and the person would rather have a more neutral name. To this one example can be cited here, the treasurer of the Organisation for Diaspora Initiative (ODI) a German national, when she took the French citizenship she has to adopt another name and was therefore called Veronique. However, till date there has been no such petition made by any PIOs in Reunion to change his name for religious reasons.

The mode of name changes allowed since 1985 is to register a "current" first and/or last name with the government. This name will appear on passports and driving licenses, but is not changed on the birth certificate. There are no reports of Hindus in Reunion adopting a "current" Hindu name, though some have taken a second first name, usually in addition to the Christian name. Thus this multiple identity of the PIOs in Réunion Island does not prevent their loyalty towards France and at the same time do not bar them from reviving their cultural roots.

Though Christianity becomes a way of acceptable social life and Hinduism becomes the sacred inner identity yet the reform agenda is really strong within the Temple association, a Brahmin priest was recently imported from India to propagated Hinduism among Tamils younger generation. However, the incumbent President of Tamij Sangam was not in favour of importing a Brahmin priest to the island rather he was for maintaining the status quo- by not allowing the Indians priest and opines that the caste-less PIOs society in La Réunion will be stratified once a Brahmin priest is welcome here. He reiterated that, since Hinduism in La Réunion did not recognized Caste system therefore it is not

---

84 Ibid.
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

necessary to import a Brahmin priest rather he was in favour of sending local devotees to be trained as a priest in India, which according to him will placed Hinduism in La Réunion the most unique society in the world.

Thus, we can conclude that, the determinants for the transformation of Indian indentured identity were shaped primarily by the French assimilation policy during the indentured period. The French nationality for PIOs in La Réunion,\(^ {85} \) brings a lot of benefits especially for the children like free school, house plan, and possibility to buy land, job, better salary, and perhaps the social security system for the unemployed youth. Christianity which became the social mask for the PIOs to be acceptable in the society began to gradually wane among PIOs in La Réunion with the separation of the political system from religion date from 1905 and thus PIOs in La Reunion till date are governed by this law, earlier Christianity as discussed above was a part of the political system, meaning all the law tended to comply to the Christians rules. PIOs, though under the French system for several decades yet PIO's have retained their cultural traits in some form or the other.

\(^ {85} \) The PIOs in La Reunion were granted French citizenship in 1920, according to L.M.Singhvi Report, However, there was a complete unanimity among the PIOs in La Reunon, that it was Probably in 1889, perhaps during the II Republic, Corroborated by NAI.
3.1. Theorising Ethnic Identity

In order to understand the determinants of the transformation of the Indian indentured identity, it will be imperative to contextualize what ethnic identity according to different scholars.

3.1.1. Max Weber

Max Weber, in his Society and Economy argued that “The belief in group affinity, regardless of whether it has any objective foundation, can have important consequences especially for the formation of a political community. We shall call "ethnic groups" those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of custom or both, or because of the memories of colonisation and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. ... Ethnic membership does not constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly in the political sphere. On the other hand, it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organised that inspires the belief in common ethnicity”.1 Driedger further argues that, the loyalty of the French Canadians toward the English polity is today determined above all by the deep antipathy against the economic and social structure, and the way of life, of the neighbouring United

---

Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

States; hence membership in the Dominion of Canada appears as a guarantee of their own traditions.²

3:1:2. Dashefsky

Dashefsky believes that Group identification is "a generalised attitude involving a personal attachment to a group and a positive orientation toward being a member of a group. Therefore, ethnic identification takes place when the group in question is one with whom the individual believes he has a common ancestry based on shared individual characteristics and/or shared socio-cultural experiences".³

Two conceptually important qualities of ethnic identity emerge from Weber’s definition. First, ethnicity is a subjective phenomenon. Though it may strongly correlate with ‘objective’ phenotypic traits, ethnicity is fundamentally different from race. Phenotypic racial features are objectively rooted within individual bodies, while ethnicity is a subjective identification that attaches individual personalities to external systems of shared values and symbolic representations. Ethnicity then is contextually and subjectively defined, which makes it fluid, malleable and difficult to measure with precise quantitative indicators. Ethnicity is also an inter-subjective phenomenon that has both inclusive and exclusive dimensions. Discussing the ethnicity of a single individual in isolation makes as much sense as does listening to “the sound from one hand clapping”.⁴ Ethnic identity, like most aspects of individual personality, comes into being only through assertion against others which is perhaps prevalent in Réunion after 1980’s. It acquires meaning in individuals’ inter-subjective encounters with co-ethnics and ethnic others. In co-ethnic encounters, ethnicity has inclusive binding properties and “becomes a powerful identity merging the individual with the group.”⁵ By contrast, encounters with people from different ethnic groups reveal the exclusive element of ethnic identity. An act of inclusion implicitly presupposes an act of exclusion; ethnic identification operates

by excluding non-members as others who do not belong within a bounded universe of shared meaning. Though encounters with ethnic others certainly do not have to end in conflict, they are qualitatively different from co-ethnic interactions.

Taken together, ethnicity's inclusive and exclusive dimensions generate both intra-ethnic cohesion and particularistic friction in plural societies. Theorists have long disputed the sources of ethnic identification. Debates between primordialists, who interpret ethnicity as an affective, primitive force, and instrumentalists, who see ethnic identification as an economically rational strategy, have ended in a theoretical impasse. Despite intensive theoretical treatment, ethnicity remains as inscrutable as ever. Though there are some sociologists who claim to have reached some unanimity on the issue, Yet the origin of ethnic identification is an intellectually interesting question. All Historians and sociologist alike seem to concur, however, that ethnicity "rests upon a singularly potent set of symbolic resources," and that it "operates in a fluid and changing way in the political arena." Furthermore, whether or not they spring from an affective, primordial genesis, ethnic groups provide certain benefits to their members and can be seen as utility maximizing actors.

Regardless of its origins, ethnicity exists, and it's subjective and inter-subjective properties influence economic behavior and economic development. With increased specialization and division of labour-that is, with increased differentiation of the role system of a given society-status aggregates may become a manifold of attribute and role designations, a situation which greatly complicates the work of the social analyst and which explains in part the fondness of some social scientists for so-called simpler societies without highly developed role systems. Culture consists of those shared ways in which life, activities and the world make sense. Society is that perceived social environment to which an individual define themselves morally and to which they

---

7 Ibid,p.11.
differentiate themselves from others. The issue of defining the concept of culture and society is a very relative term. The relationship between different forms of discourse in societies marked by a plurality of traditions can therefore be regarded as a political struggle between different versions of the world. Some such versions may be "muted" and will then fail to surface. \(^{10}\)

3:1:4. Hylland Eriksen

There are different levels and different degrees of both society and culture. In some societies, it is necessary that the inhabitants have very much in common in order for the society to continue to fulfill their needs and to continue to exist without changing profoundly. In such societies, the favourite laboratories for anthropologists, system boundaries, both social and cultural, can apparently be delineated easily. In the societies where Hylland studies of the Cultural integration in Trinidad and Tobago, He finds, "any such delineation is in some sense arbitrary.\(^{11}\)

3.1.4.1. The Assimilation Mobility

The assimilation-mobility theory asserts that so long as ethnic groups exhibit high levels of social cohesion, they will continue to possess distinctive cultures (values, beliefs, norms, and attitudes) and exhibit distinctive behavioral patterns. The more socially cohesive an ethnic group, the more distinctive the cultural and behavioral patterns of its members. When group cohesion begins to break down, group culture and behavior become progressively less distinctive until they become indistinguishable from those of the larger society. Two possibly interrelated processes are said to accelerate the assimilating ethnic’s social and cultural integration into the social mainstream. Greater social contact with individuals outside one's own ethnic group leads to new value cues and social pressure to conform to an alternative behavior pattern. Not wishing to be out of step with their new social intimates, many assimilating ethnics forsake their old values

\(^{10}\) Eriksen, T.H (1992). “Multiple traditions and the question of cultural integration”, *Ethnos*, no. 3-4, p.last

\(^{11}\) *Ibid.*
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

and behaviors for new, more "American" ones. The second process is mobility - economic, social and residential. Almost all immigrant groups to the United States have begun their American existence at the bottom of the socioeconomic stratification system. Socioeconomic mobility, or the acquisition of greater material wealth and more prestigious occupational status, brings the ethnic into contact with middle- and upper-class people who, according to the assimilation theorists, serve as the chief conveyors of dominant social norms. Upwardly mobile ethnics confront such agents of Americanization in the workplace, new residential neighbourhoods, and new organizations and social situations. Thus, when individuals engage in closer social contact with people of different ethnic (racial, religious and/or national) characteristics, and especially when such contact is coupled with upward socioeconomic mobility, mainstream cultural and behavioral patterns are likely to prevail.12 This trends can be also be said to be true of Indian indentured workers situation in Réunion particularly after the introduction of DOM, where every individual can fathom the economic and social benefits arising out of the system thereby subsuming themselves to the dominant French culture.

3.1.5. Robert Dahl

Nowhere are the political manifestations of this assimilation-mobility thesis more clearly stated than in Robert Dahl's who govern13? Dahl introduces the concept of political assimilation, arguing that "ethnic politics .... is clearly a transitional phenomenon.14. Ethnic groups, he claims, go through three stages en route to political oblivion. First the group exhibits a high degree of political homogeneity, shown by "similarity in political attitude, and ... a pronounced tendency toward voting alike.15" He attributes it to low levels of social assimilation and lack of economic mobility. "Political homogeneity," he says, "is a function of socioeconomic homogeneity".16

---

14 Ibid, p.34.
15 Ibid, p.35.
16 Ibid.
By the third stage, the ethnic group is socially and economically heterogeneous. Large segments have been assimilated and are economically mobile. Politically too the group is now heterogeneous as a result of disintegrating ethnic social cohesion (assimilation) and upward socioeconomic mobility (middle-class status). The new ethnic middle class has adopted a new culture and life style at the same time that it eschews intimate social contact with lower-status ethnics. The political ramifications of this process are predictable: "To these people, ethnic politics is often embarrassing or meaningless. Political attitudes and loyalties have become a function of socioeconomic characteristics. Members of the group display little political homogeneity". 17

3.2. Determinants of transformation

The Following are the major determinants of the transformation of Indian indentured workers to that of a People of Indian Origins (PIOs).
1. Citizenship.
2. Religious institution.
3. Acculturation on Language.
5. French institution notably School
6. The Economic factor and
7. Separation of state from Religion.

3.2.1. French Citizenship

Prior to the Nationality law of 1889, all the Indian indentured were British India subject in Réunion Island. However, by the Nationality Law of 1889, around 48 Indian indentured benefited from this law and notably after 1920, Indian indentured workers becomes a Frenchmen, this marks the historic transformation of Indian identity in the

17 Ibid.
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

Though the law declare that a person born in Réunion Island 'irrevocably Français' there was a lot of complication and bureaucratic hurdles between the British India government and the French government in Réunion Island. This bureaucratic hurdle was the main reason that prevented Indian indentured workers from acquiring French citizenship till 1920.

3.2.2. Religious Institutions

With the inception of the indentured system in La Réunion, the catholic missionaries along with the planters' played important role in imposing catholic traditions and beliefs on the PIOs. In La Réunion, each of the early arrivals - at the insistence of their employer/owners and the government administration - took on Christian names and had their children baptized in the Catholic Church. However, they did not abandon Hinduism in the process and to this day it is common for the Indians, to attend Catholic mass and confession, yet this did not prevent them from visiting Hindu temple. The very unique feature of the island form of belief is that, "It is the way it is here," the local lay Hindu priests say. "If you believed in both religions then God will look at you twice." You have double protection said one of the local teachers retired from Piton St.Leu. The Hindus also worship the "Black Virgin," which is a blend of Goddess Kali and Virgin Mary. On the other hand, the Catholics are disturbed by the fact that majority of the Hindu of adoring all the saints as various forms of God and not embracing the idea of Christ's supremacy. The state's official government religious listing gives 700,000 Catholics, 50,000 Muslims and 30,000 Buddhists of Chinese origin, no mention of Hindus is made. According to the government official records in La Reunion, there is not a single Hindu in Reunion-even though 30 percent of the islands' is of Indian descent.

---

18 Immigration report 1901, Para 18. Cited in Dept of Revenue and Agricultural, Emigration Branch, December 1902, ProsNo.4&5, Part A.
19 Some of the most common Indian Baptised name in La Reunion are Alexis, Francois, Jean, Marie, Nicole or Huguette.
21 This concept was developed by Ghassarian, that though outwardly Christian yet whenever any important decision is taken they always choose to follow the Hindu path.
22 Though the French government did not allow Census based on ethnic lines yet it is assumed that PIOs, Black and the white constitutes 30 percent each and the rest Chinese.
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

Indians in Reunion are popularly known as "Tamouls," since majority of PIOs in the island are from South India, but the term Tamoul is a synonymous to "Hindu" in local parlance.\textsuperscript{24}

3.2.2.1. Church

Under the joint pressure of the church and their employers, PIOs in La Réunion were obliged to learn the Christian religion, to go to church, to wear French clothes and to give Christian names to their children. They have thus adopted the three main Christian rites of the life i.e. baptism, marriage and funeral, as an unavoidable part of life in the island.\textsuperscript{25} The indentured workers had to express Christian attitudes to be more accepted-if accepted at all-by their employers and by the society at large. It appears that a Hindu sense of conformity helped them to act properly according to the dominant norms and rules of the host society to their own advantage.\textsuperscript{26} This external compliance to the dominant models explains why there is a majority of Christian first names, notably "Marie" and "Jean," among people of Indian descent in the island.\textsuperscript{27} For example, the Presidents of the ODI, had a first name Jean Regis and his wife Marianne, however both his sons are given typical Indian name, Shankaran and Rajendran.

3.2.2.2. The Priest

Till the late 1980's the PIOs and their descendants in the island were expected to act as Christians if they did not want to endure God's future and society's present reprisals, it was virtually impossible for them to avoid an outward display of Christianity. Memories of force confession in the church by the church authority and their employees are many and stories highlighting the authoritarian and oppressive behavior of Christian priests

\textsuperscript{24} Though they were historically called "Malbars" which later was considered a derogatory term referred to PIOs.
\textsuperscript{26} Notably the idea that each thing should be assigned its designated place.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIOs. The catholic missionaries used all means to convert the indentured workers to their faith, instances like an old man (PIOs) and his co-workers went to the church (under their employer's pressure), and the priest systematically asked them to kneel in front of him and to answer the question whether they were Christians or pagans? A query to which they all responded the same, the answer which were learned before: "We are Christians. A Christian is someone who has been baptized, who apply the Christian dogma.... Then, a woman, during her catechism; the priest assigned the children to draw a picture of Christ surrounded by the apostles. She did her best and draws the Christ with three apostles in, what she felt to be, a nice picture. When the priest saw this drawing he angrily took a ruler, asked her to unfold her fingers and badly rapped them, the number of blows corresponding to the missing apostles in her drawing. Such incidents were quite a routine in the island, only ceased to occur in the 1970s and more so after 1980's. Not surprisingly, this type of intimidation has failed to create a strong inner religious commitment rather a negative impression was developed by the PIOs in the island which also deviates from the real teaching of Jesus Christ. It only help them developed an alternate orientation, entailing the integration of external signs of Christian religion and the correct interpretation of social roles linked to it.

The catholic priests constantly pointed out the norms to be followed and adopted. For a very long time, the figure of the priest has been associated with hierarchical authority and punishment. This image, deeply ingrained, explains why, even today, in the majority of families of Indian origin in the island, we find at least one Christian picture prominently displayed in the living room and no Hindu representations. We will see further that it is only since the last few years that these explicit Christian symbols in the household are slowly being replaced by Hindu deities. Though Catholic priests succeeded to a certain extent in their mission, but their success has been partial and mainly external. Practically every person of Indian origin in La Réunion has been baptized, has been to the church

29 I was told by the local residents of St. Andre, that before they go to the Church they were foretold the question and answer that will be ask.
30 Ghassarian, C(December 1997), Opecit.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid, p.2
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

and knows some Christian prayers, sometimes better than the white Christian population of the island. Meanwhile, despite their vigorous disapproval from outside, Hindu practices were never abandoned. They have only been relatively hidden by the immigrants to avoid enhancing an already negative perception of them because of their differences. This is why numerous Indian families have erected private temples in their courtyard consisting of oblong stones representing various deities and ancestors, for private usage, allowing them to maintain and express their original belief and traditions.  

3.3. Confluence of Catholic and Hinduism

It was this failure of the employers to respect their workers' rights to practice Hinduism under the terms of the engagement contract that lent the religion a secret, even clandestine, character, though initially agreed when the contract was signed. This situation endured from earliest immigration down till the time when workers were finally allotted plots of land on the plantations to construct temples and officially worship their gods together. Precisely this was a glorious period for the indentured workers when this island ceased to be an alien place for the immigrants. There are several documents and oral traditions that show this small concession given to the indentured workers, Hindu practices, by the white land-owners was yet strongly disapproved of by the church. We can find their lament in some texts that read: "It should be forbidden for Indians to play their drums in the street. This awful music, the incense, their clamor and their dance disturb the entire neighborhood. Their grotesque images, the weird ornaments of their cult express the very sad vision of an open temple close to the church."  

When the practice of Hinduism was finally authorised, Christian priests still did everything they could to force the cessation of Hinduism. Ghassarian also narrated that; a priest's sermon in the church of a village where he warned its Christian audience not to be tempted to attend "the religion of walking on fire, of piercing the body with needles," that he defined as "the religion of Satan...." Because of its relative attraction among a

33 In most of the Hindu families in La Reunion there is a private Temple in the courtyard.  
34 This concession, construction of Temple, according to Ghassarian, was also a strategy to maintain a stable supply of Indian labour force on the island.  
35 Ghassarian, C. (Dec, 1997) Op cit. p.2. The Tamij Sangam President also narrated that Religious celebration was usually banned by the white authorities on the pretext on Noise pollution.
particular category of the population in the island, notably the poorest, like the
descendants of African slaves, Hinduism has rapidly been perceived by catholic priests as
a rival religion. Their only possible recourse in preventing its spread was to create and
diffuse a negative perception of Hindu practices in the Island, said Channemoungam, the
President of Tamij Sangam. Because of its non official character and because of the fact
that its religious practices were practically hidden in the beginning, Hinduism was very
soon associated with some kind of sorcery.36

Thus, it is important to stress that the Tamils' eventual official practice of Hinduism did
not imply the end of the Christian conversion and its social display. On the other hand, it
is also impossible to say that they have really been converted to Christianity. This
religion became above all a matter of mere public display, acted out to satisfy the Island's
dominant culture, those having the political and economic power, and thus demonstrating
their integration into the mainstream of the society.37 This gives a unique colour of being
socially Christian and Hindus in the private spheres.

3.3.1. Local Hindu Priest

Hinduism has been adapted to the new cultural and social context of this French colony
in the Indian Ocean. As there were no Brahmin priests among the Tamil newcomers, the
priestly function was assigned to the workers who knew better than the others the
religious traditions, those who knew how to read and to interpret Tamil sacred books,
those who received a special knowledge through the oral tradition from their elders, etc.
These persons acted like the pujaris in India. They were never full time priests. Despite
some regional variations, as in the villages of Tamil Nadu, the gods' figures are the same
throughout the entire Island. The most powerful figure of folk Hinduism in La Réunion is
the goddess Kali, who requires powerful self-sacrifices and animal offerings. With Kali
are associated Madurai Viran, Muniswaran, and Mariyamma, three powerful deities to
whom devotees address vows. The preliminary invocation of any ceremony if of course

37 Christian Ghassarian,( 1994). “Food cultural practices among Tamils in La Réunion (Indian ocean)”,
still directed to Ganesh. The other deities invoked, who only receive vegetable offerings, are Shiva and his son Murugan. More occasionally some prayers are addressed to a form of Vishnu: Peroumal. Each Tamil family bas its own family cult (koledeivom) addressed to a special deity. Among the specific expressions of this folk religion in the Island let us mention may be made of fire-walking, the ceremony of kavadee, the animal sacrifices and the priest’s ritual of possession by a deity or an ancestor.38

3.3.3. Acculturation

The PIOs of La Réunion indeed offers many interesting examples of maintenance of the fundamental patterns and a rite of Hinduism within the social context of their dominant host society. The ceremonies of walking on fire and Pongol, for instance, have been celebrated at the beginning of the French civil year, when the workers had some rest as result of the post Sugarcane harvest season. The ceremony for the ancestors was also celebrated on the official day of the Christian religion that is during Ail Saint's day. Hindu attitudes associated with birth, marriage and death, although not quite manifest, have been similarly maintained at the same time as Christian practices. Initially most of the Hindu religious ceremonies were celebrated during the winter season probably between Christmas and New Year’s Day, but today they can celebrate Tamil New year with the appropriate months and days.39 Thus the acculturation was systematically carried out through Baptism, marriage, rituals etc.

3.3.3.1. Baptism

As regards to baptism, PIOs have been obliged to officially perform this Christian rite at church, but they have further associated it with Hindu rites and practices performed privately at home, to bring auspiciousness to their child’s life, thus a cultural synchronisation of Christianity and Hinduism occur among the PIOs in La Réunion. Which corresponds to this Christian rite consists in the shaving of the child’s hair, to rid

39 Axel Kichenin, the former Mayor of St.Marie and President of USKIR.He was responsible for introducing holiday for Hindu, Muslim and Blacks in the island during stint as a Mayor.
him of his potential bad luck in the future. Moreover, after baptism a baptism name was usually given to PIOs and its ethnic name was chose by their parents in consultation with an eminent astrologer, to give him or an auspicious name.\textsuperscript{40}

3.3.3.2. Marriage

Marriage, till the 1970's was compulsorily performed at the Church as it was mandatory for one to register. However, this marriage ceremony though performed in the church was arranged taking note of the Hindu traditions like choice of the zodiac sign, months date and the hour of the marriage\textsuperscript{41}. Ghassarian argues that "the valorization of the girl's virginity, a strong Indian value, is expressed by wearing a white diadem on her forehead. Among other features that maintain Indian patterns, there is the official encounter of the two families contracting a marriage at the girl's parent's house; the ostentation of a big and prestigious marriage; the fact that the future husband must already possess a house before daring to propose the marriage, etc."\textsuperscript{42}

3.3.3.3. Funerals

Concerning funerals, all the rite are publicly performed with the traditions of the Catholic Church and at the cemetery, but they are systematically preceded by Hindu rites in the private space at home.\textsuperscript{43} Though they were buried in the same cemetery, Hindus however are buried separately on the side of the cemetery.\textsuperscript{44} Since the dead body first undergoes a Hindu rite at home followed by traditions such as touching of the feet of the dead, throwing of coins, showering flowers and petals and sometime rice in the hole of the grave before the grave is finally sealed, washing of hands and feet with water that looks saffron and fasting performed by the family members of the deceased.\textsuperscript{45} Unlike in India on these days the mourners wear black clothes which are a clear signs and strong indication of the French assimilation legacy.

\textsuperscript{40} Ghassarian, C.(December1997) \textit{Op}cit.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Narrated by Luçay Soubhaya Permnamaick at the site of Piton St.Leu Cemetery, on 7\textsuperscript{th} April 2008.
\textsuperscript{45} To show that elders are superior and respected in the society and perhaps to ask his/her protection.
3.3.3.3.1. Ritual

The rite, performed during the official Christian day for the dead in the host society (1st November), falls into two parts: one is public, at the cemetery, and uses the symbols of the Christian religion, such as the flowers and the candles placed on the grave; the other is private and only for the family members, at home, and uses camphor in a Hindu ceremony. Usually the father of the households leads the ceremony and recites the mantras taking the names of all family members, who have been fasting for a week; in the events of the dead of the father the eldest male members in the family performed this function. At the end of this ceremony the meals normally preferred by the deceased, during his lifetime, was placed on the leaves of banana and offered followed by a community feast. Despite the absence of contacts for more than one century between the PIOs in La Réunion and India, the main religious and cultural traits of Hinduism have been observed and conserved with extreme conscientiousness in this island, even in the absence of the full officiating priest.

3.3.3.3.2. Unique Blend of faith

Through the interaction of these two religions i.e. Catholicism and Hinduism in La Réunion, there emerged a unique blend of faith. The PIOs, though under the French institutions for several decades, could still preserved most of the basic tenets of Hinduism are at the same time influenced by Christianity. However, the overt adoption of Christianity has been a criterion of integration and acceptance across the whole society in La Réunion and the idea that the Hindu gods are the best and the strongest never disappeared. Despite their isolation from India, the disappearance of the Tamil language, the disappearance of the caste system, perhaps its extinction and despite the vigorous anti-Hinduism that was perpetrated by the people who are in authority from the time of the indentured system, PIOs and their descendants have managed to conserved their principal beliefs, rites and practices.

47 Ghassarian, C. (Dec, 1997), Ibid.
Thus one may even speculate that the PIOs particularly the Tamil in this society offers a unique example of the conservation of Hindu practices that are virtually the same as those one could find in South Indian villages in the last century. In spite of the fact that people in the Diaspora generally froze their original traditions to the dominant culture. Therefore Historians like Ghassarian argued that, while it has been adopted, folk Hinduism has been maintained in La Réunion almost as it was in India at the time of the emigration. In fact, the main modifications to Hinduism into this French Island occur in the contemporary society. Paradoxically, what Tamil immigrants and their descendants have been able to preserve for more than one hundred years of indentured settlement on the island, notwithstanding the church disapproval and the compelled involvement in Christianity, is now radically threatened by the new generation of persons of Indian descent themselves, by importing Brahmin priests from Tamil Nadu to officiate in Hindu temples in La Réunion, this new generation is encouraging the adhesion to a new form of Hinduism, defined as the "true" one, in which the worship is principally addressed to called "vegetarian and peaceful gods" (who do not require animal offerings nor priestly possession) like Shiva, Murugan, Vishnu and Ganesh. The president of the Tamij Sangam, also expressed his skepticism that the imported Brahmin priest could revive the caste system. Moreover, the younger generation and some radical Indian association who are involved in this revival are of the opinion that to be more Indian they began to criticised their parents for their complementary practice of Christian religion and began to removed Christian pictures from their own living room, replacing them with Hindu ones. However, the radical changes that this new generation of PIOs in La Réunion wanted to introduce is not as easy for their older generation who for many decades been adapted to this lifestyle and

48 Ibid.
49 Offering to these gods do not require animal sacrifice nor priestly possession hence term vegetarian and peaceful.
51 This line of opinion is gaining currency in La Réunion at present because there are some Indian associations who opines that in order to be closer to the motherland they need a priest form India. However, Lucay Camalon, the President of ACRI, lamented that the offering charges taken by the imported priest were exorbitantly higher than the local priest.
52 During my field work in La Reunion at Trois Bassin town, when I entered the house of Marriane, she showed me their private temple constructed in their courtyard and also the portraits of Mary and some Christian saint in the common room.
are not very receptive to this idea of radical change at the present situation, though they believed that Hindu god is the strongest and the best.

Thus as mentioned earlier, PIOs in La Réunion today face an important dilemma emerging from within i.e. “to reform or not to reform their ancestral practices, to adopt or not to adopt a new form of Hinduism that is not of their ancestors and elders that comes from "outside" what is now their society”.

Moreover, this is the time when they are confronted with western tradition of hygiene that disapproved the Hindu traditions of animal sacrifices, this help to reinvigorate the energy of the youngster who are for radical reformation and spark a wide protest all over the island.

3.4. Clothing

The first adaptation PIOs had to make was in their dress. The French policy of cultural assimilation forced them to adopt new clothing. Very early, Indian women stopped wearing their traditional dress, and men had to wear trousers. I came to learn during my field study in La Réunion that wearing Indian traditional dress was a matter of shame after the introduction of DOM. All the residents in the Island were considered to be liberated from that of French subject to that of a French citizen. Therefore, the Indian nose ring, anklets and toe ring that were considered as an indentured identity were no longer worn. The little dot Indian women place on their forehead, similarly expressing their cultural difference, disappeared as well. Meanwhile, despite these changes, some continuity with Indian traditions can be found since women will not wear any skirt or dress up to the knee, this is true to those who do not intermarry with the Creole since the indentured period.

3.4.1. Significance of colour

There is also a stark contrast during marriage ceremony that expressed in the form of colour. While in India wearing a red sari in marriages that objectify the honor and the

---

virginity of the girl is not digestible to the older generation in La Réunion, the reason being without the white dress and diadem they were accustomed to under the French system, these Christian symbols did not disturb the basic Hindu conceptions of purity and constituted a modified expression of Hinduism. Moreover, in La Réunion, wearing a white western dress had been the norm when going to the temple. Thus white saris are usually worn during Hindu marriages and while going to temple. Therefore, what is a conventional tradition in India, red saris during marriages, becomes a problematic modernity in La Réunion and, what is the adapted tradition there, white dress at church and at the temple, has an inauspicious character in India and in its practices recently imported to the island, white saris during Hindu marriages or religious ceremonies.

3.5. Language

Creole was - and still is - a mixed dialect based largely on the French language. It was the product of the verbal interaction between the white landowners and their slaves. However, despite the presence of numerous French words, Creole contains some characteristic words and sometimes a specific syntax. Creole also became the language of the white people who came too late to acquire lands and who had an economic status very close to that of the slave population. Though French was spoken by a small proportion of the population (the upper strata), it was from the beginning the official written language of the society and Creole was the adapted dialect for the lower population. French on the other hand was the language of judicial power and Creole the language of subjection. A crucial characteristic of Creole is that it was a subsequent language largely created from French. This fact still has an imprint on the linguistic and social situation in La Réunion today.

55 A white sari in India is worn by a widow and also the white colours are symbolically associated with mourning.
56 Ghassarian, C. (Dec, 1997), Opici, p.5.
57 Nemo. (1979), "La situation linguistique des minorités ethniques à l'ile de La Réunion ", Etudes créole, 2(1).
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

3.5.1. Creole

Ranked among the lower strata of the population, Indian workers had to learn Creole. It is important to indicate that although it was not the official language, Creole became the most common spoken language of the colony it was the first new language immigrants had to learn. The appropriation of Creole by this new population of Indian descent transformed this dialect as numerous Tamil words were added to the Creole lexicon that already contained words of Malagasy origin.58 Among the new words was the word Kari, meaning 'meal' in Tamil. The entire population of the Island uses this word today to designate the daily meal based on rice. Since the masking of Indian patterns facilitated incorporation into the society, the use of the Tamil language that was sometimes simply prohibited by the landowners became less and less favoured and was eventually forgotten. This original language has only been maintained by a few people who began to act as priests in the Hindu temples, when the official practice of this religion was ultimately tolerated.59

3.5.1.1. Linguistic adjustment

The use of Creole and the loss of Tamil by the immigrants and their descendants is linguistic witness of their adjustment into the dominant social structure. Those who settled in the Island after the completion of their contract became part of the general population. Thus, immigrants' children born on La Réunion were automatically French. Like the majority of the population of the Island, they were French citizens speaking Creole as a first language.

However, the most interesting features about the loss of the Tamil language among the PIOs are that, this loss did not imply the disappearance of Tamil representations forms of speech and practices. These have persisted, especially in the private sphere, even through the media of Creole and in a smaller degree of French. PIOs do still have numerous traditional ways of thinking particularly proverbs and maxims referring to elders and their

advice. Notions such as cleanliness, purity, honour, protection, devotion, auspiciousness, sacrifice, fate, separation, propitiation, the evil eye, dependence and hierarchy are still constantly mentioned or implicitly referred to in daily life.\(^{60}\) This shows that a specific system of values and ideas can persist outside the context of its original language of expression. Multicultural societies often create this kind of disjuncture between language and culture.\(^{61}\)

The first half of the twentieth Century saw Chinese and Muslim Guajarati’s who came to the Island as traders.\(^{62}\) If the circumstances of immigration of these populations differ from that of the African, the Malagasy and the Hindu population, the Chinese and the Guajarati’s still had to speak Creole to accommodate themselves to the host society. Their coming and integration did not change the basic linguistic stratification of colonial society. As for the Hindu population, the second generation, under the pressure of the dominant society they have lost their mother tongue. For almost all the non French immigrants in La Réunion, Creole has been the first language one needs to learn. The loss of the original language among Africans, Malagasy, "Poor Whites" (Petits-Blancs), Tamils, Chinese and Gujaratis is also due to the numerous inter-marriages that occurred from the earliest days on the Island.

3.5.2. French

Historically French has been the official language used notably by the administration and the church. However after 1946, when the status of the Island changed from that of a colony to overseas department, French acquired a new status, it was introduced as a mode of general education. But still French is not spoken by the majority of people at home. It is a second language whose official status only starts when a child goes to school.\(^{63}\) For most of the population in the Island, Creole, integrated during the first socialisation into


the family, is the mother tongue. It is the language of emotion and is used among relatives and during informal interactions outside the household.

3.5.2.1. French as Elite status

Being the official language of this French department, French is not much widespread in the society. It is evident mostly in its written form, it is the language of the law and of everything that implies political power. It is also spoken in administrative arenas, in office work, except among workers in the fields and in the factories, on the radio, on television etc. As French is learnt at school, its mastery demonstrates a level of education. Yet only a small fragment of the population can actually speak it. The ability or the inability to speak French both establishes and expresses stratification in society. Daily interactions and conversations operate with this implicit criterion. This linguistic feature explains why metropolitan French people, visiting the Island or living there, place themselves - and are placed by the native population of La Réunion - in an implicit position of superiority because they speak French fluently. Although this phenomenon is not quite fully and consciously experienced on both sides, it nevertheless operates as a distinctive pattern among people in the Island.

French has been and is still the language of political power. Its usage today places one in a valued position, especially when interacting with someone who does not have a good command over the language. Thus, there are two sections of population using the French language in La Réunion: a small proportion of people from metropolitan France, approximately five percent, who used as a first language or as a mother tongue; and the native Islanders who, with the exception of the very few families of French roots who have owned - and for a great part still own - the lands, and educated families, middle-class and upper middle class, who make a point of speaking French at home, hardly speak French outside the formal contexts in the society. Therefore apart from the above elite class, for the general population, French is a second language although spoken everywhere in the places of power and status in society.

64 Cellier, P. (1985) "Diglossie réunionnaise", Cahiers de Praxématique 5, Montpellier
Thus French can only be commanded very easily by those school goers since it is a medium of communication and learning. Secondly, it is spoken by people who wanted to stake a higher status in the society, like in India, the elite family who tend to used English with their pets, so is in La Reunion, During my field work, on my way to Troi Bassin, to meet the mayor Roland Ramakistin, I have an opportunity to meet Claire, the most wealthy person in the locality, who command her dog in French, so in general French is spoken only when a person, in La Réunion, want to place themselves in a position of superiority over the other. Speaking French can thus be a matter of prestige among one’s peers, revealing one’s education and status. This works for the interaction between native islanders in relation to the metropolitan. However, interaction between people born in metropolitan France is different. Here, the practice of French cannot depict any superiority because it is the first language of communication either at Home or in market. It is important to stress that while visiting this French department or living there, French metropolitan, often do not realise how the practice of French can be a difficult exercise for the natives whom they spontaneously address in French.

3.5.2.2. French in relation to other Local dialect

In La Réunion, as Creole is close to French, it is relatively difficult for a native from France to speak it, it sounds like speaking a "little French", full of "mistakes". However, this is not true in all the French overseas colonies. For example Maori in Polynesian’s vis à vis Réunion Island, the colonial history of these two societies is quite different: there were people in Tahiti before the coming of the French but there was nobody in La Réunion before the French decided to establish three centuries ago. Besides the entire population in La Réunion has its origins outside the Island this explains why the dominant model, that of the colonial and neo-colonial power, is the one that is most valued. A manifestation of the valorisation of the French language and implicitly of French ways can be found in the effort that native middle class people in La Réunion

---

65 Among others, Pierre Bourdieu has remarkably shown how language can be used to express status (Bourdieu 1991).
66 Who are in a land officially called La France de l'Océan Indien.
67 At least, this is how historians in La Réunion see things until further archaeological evidence.
often make to encourage their children to speak French at home, even if they do not manage this language very well and still speak Creole in the family. Thus for people who have learnt Creole during their childhood, French is the language of high status. With the same logic, the use of Creole in public contexts exhibits a certain deficiency.

3.5.2.3. Revival of Creole

Despite this ideological context of putting Français in a superior status, some local intellectuals have, since the seventies, been claiming a specific identity based on Creole and advocating its usage instead of Français in La Réunion. They revalidate Creole by writing about its literature and for some by using it during public gatherings, on television, radio, at the university, etc. Earlier, the only exception where the public use of Creole was not disparaged was in folksongs. These intellectuals fully trained in French and for most of them in France, some of them who teach French literature at the University de La Réunion, began to write novels and poetry in Creole. Their ideological position has progressively justified and revalued the usage of Creole in political discourse. Nevertheless, this usage is still often used as a last resort because too much Creole in a speech could be perceived by the electors as a sign of incompetence.

Thus Creole as a language is used to define a "Creole identity", distinct from that of French. Slowly but steadily today most of the politically conscious local intellectual leaders strongly advocate the use of Creole in school. Meanwhile, it is interesting to notice the fact that, most of people including PIOs do not want their children to receive education in Creole. This very issue expresses the gap between a new generation of intellectuals and the larger population conditioned by the dominant ideology placing

---

71 This position is expressed both in private and on radio talk shows on the island.
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

French above Creole. For most parents, the use of Creole at school would not favour a good educational training and, therefore, the acquisition of a higher status in society. It should be emphasized here that the contrast of opinion in the Island over the question of the used of French and Creole is not between Creole and metropolitan French speakers but between two categories of Creole speakers: On the one hand, there are those who manage to speak French and advocates Creole as a medium of education in school. On the other hand, there are those who do not speak French very well but sees this language as an avenue for a bettering their social and economic status if not at least for their children.

The attempts to create Creole identity by the intellectual circle fail to strike a common chord with the masses. This attitude, which they thought was the ideal way to express the Islands Creole identity, does not always produce the expected results. The reason being till today most of the employment sectors are directly regulated from metropolitan France, apart from some radio and teaching profession Creole hardly offer any employment to encourage the Island population.

The issue of French having an elite status can be elaborated from the following experience of mine. In St Denis during a dinner conversation in one of the PIOs family, I had the opportunity to meet the Directrice of a Hospital in La Réunion born in France who recently come to the Island. The Directrice in a well manner wishes Christian and his family in Tamil Vanakam. Immediately the landlady instead of replying in Tamil started conversing in French, she believed answering her in Creole or Tamil would have been accepting a position of inferiority, something that would have afflicted her self-esteem even more. Thus the issue of understanding others' social position and motivations during the interaction and trying to assert a superior status can sometimes lead to cultural misunderstandings.

3.6. Schools

The French education in former colonies and overseas is meant for the widespread use of the French language. Here they were more selective and concerned with educating the
local elite that could eventually fill the lower ranks of the colonial civil service. There were no colour bars in French schools. The primary concern was to have intelligent children or perhaps children of high-status families who were most likely to become loyal civil servants.72 Almost as soon as it was established in Africa the European type of school was assumed by both colonists and Africans to be one of the keys to economic and political progress. The colonists were particularly interested in its possibilities for training better skilled labour forces, and inculcating within native populations a proper respect for the European interpretation of 'law and order'. Africans, on the other hand, noted the opportunities to learn the secrets of the European knowledge and material success. For a brief period an apparent coincidence of interest between the two groups allowed the early European educators to establish their conception of the formal school relatively smoothly amongst many African communities.73

The State [France] is prepared to support the mission school only in so far as it affords instruction in the French language and develops sentiments of loyalty to France.74 During the first half of the 20th century there a numbers of PIOs who were educated but were mainly from the Muslim community, it was only after 1946 when the Island was regulated by DOM, PIOs most of them began to send their children to school. In La Réunion all educational programmes are regulated by the Ministry of National Education, officially called Ministère de l'éducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche.

France like in India has a highly organized educational system, which is divided into primary, secondary and tertiary (college) education. Primary and secondary education is usually imparted at public schools although a strong network of private schools also exists and free education is imparted in all Public schools. When the indentured system was abolished in France, PIOs in La Réunion get themselves enrolled in Schools and the medium of instruction, French, was no longer an alien language to them therefore the

---

system of colonization they undergoes during the indentured period become a boon to them.\textsuperscript{75}

Schooling in France is mandatory as of age 6(six), the first year of primary school while secondary education consists of collège for the first four years after primary school and the lycée for the next three years. The baccalauréat is the end-of-lycée diploma that students must attain and is comparable to British A-Leves and American SATs\textsuperscript{76}. Students have a choice of sitting for the baccalauréat général which is divided into 3 streams of study, \textit{the baccalauréat technologique} or \textit{baccalauréat professionnel}. Higher education is funded by the state and fees are very low. Students from low-income families can also apply for scholarships. The PIOs also benefitted from all these schemes Academic councils called académies are responsible for supervising all aspects of University education in a given region.\textsuperscript{77}

The Preamble of the French Constitution of 1946 sets out that \textit{"the Nation guarantees equal access for children and adults to education, vocational training and culture"}. The French education system provides compulsory schooling free of charge for children aged 6 to 16 and a right to education starting at age of 3. With its aim to serve the public, the system adapts to new educational methods, modern technology and users' expectations, and improves its management by decentralizing power. All these benefits were fathomed by the PIOs after the colony come under DOM. Thus, Assimilation through school education was perhaps the most prominent of the French signposts. Though there are school run by the planters during the indentured period yet it was not well regulated and the planters never encouraged the Indian indentured workers childrens' to go to school. According to French policy, education provided to Africans was meant to make them a part of the French family. Education in Africa has to effect the fusion of the two races

\textsuperscript{75} Lucay Soubhaya, a retired primary teacher from Piton St.Leu, Réunion Island.
\textsuperscript{77} Thomas Lebon, a Journaliste and Photographer, in an email interview, mailed on, 22nd Nov.2008.
and also the union of the two cultures. This fusion became an important part of statements concerning policies of France.  

3.7. Economic Factor

The other determinant for the transformation of Indian indentured identity in La Réunion is that of the economic factor, it is always pertinent to emphasize the economic situation of La Réunion at that point of time. Since plantation needs a lot of cheap labour. The colony demanded lots of cheap and strong working force in order to meet the demand of the country’s economic need. During this period, there are a lot Indian people who came as contract workers under the indentured system as well as traders from the early 20th century. However, with the opening of the Suez Channel and the operationalisation of steam vessel, France began to lose it economic influence in the world market, and La Réunion was nearly isolated from the main commercial sea traffic. Therefore, for those of Indian indentured workers who wanted to return after their contract was over waiting for the vessel was sometimes impossible return back to India because there was not enough space in the boat. Whereas there are others who argued that, the Indian indentured labourers were kept intentionally in Réunion by the White masters and perhaps there are those, Indian indentured workers, who had a bad memory of the famine and other social atrocities therefore utilising the saving that they made during the indentured period and now owning land in the middle of St.Denis. All that constraints drove the Indian people to start their new life in Reunion Island and the chance was given to them to acquire the French Nationality with the introduction of the Nationality Law of 1889.

3.8. Separation of Religion from State

After a Civil war in France between the Catholics and Protestants, during the III Republic, the Republic changes the law to take into consideration Protestant. 1905 there

---


79 Firmin Lacpatia, retired Historians narrated this story on 6th April 2008.

80 Sudel Fuma, Chair UNESCO, and a Historian at the Université de La Reunion, narrated this story on the 7th April 2008.
was a complete separation between the Law and the religion. A 1905 law instituted the separation of Church and State and prohibited the government from recognising, funding any religion called: *Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l'État*. The law was based on three principles: the neutrality of the state, the freedom of religious exercise, and public powers related to the church. This law is seen as the backbone of the French principle of *laïcité*. The law famously states "The Republic neither recognizes, nor salaries, nor subsidizes any religion".  

Religious buildings built prior to 1905 at taxpayers' expense are retained by the local and national government, but may be used at no expense by religious organizations. As a consequence, most Catholic churches are owned by the government. The government, since 1905, has been prohibited from owning any pre-1905 publicly built edifices, and thus religions must build and support all religious buildings at their own expense. Some local governments de facto subsidize prayer rooms as part of greater "cultural associations".

**3.8.1s. Law of 1905**

The 1901 and 1905 laws define two categories under which religious groups may register: "associations’ cultuelles" (associations of worship, which are exempt from certain taxes) and "associations’ culturelles" (cultural associations, which are not exempt from these taxes). Associations in these two categories are subject to certain management and financial disclosure requirements. An association of worship may organize only religious activities, loosely defined as liturgical services and practices, but no social or diaconal ones. A cultural association may engage in social as well as in profit-making activity. Although a cultural association is not exempt from taxes, it may receive government subsidies for its cultural and educational operations, such as schools. Religious groups normally register under both of these categories; all churches run strictly religious activities through its association of worship and operate a school under

---

82 Christian CADIVEL, a research scholars and President of AJEOI, based at St.Andre La Reunion, in an email on 7th August 2008.
Determination of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

its cultural association. Under the 1905 statute, religious groups must apply with the local prefecture to be recognized as an association of worship and receive tax-exempt status. Thus the law of 1905 gave some respite to PIO’s to form their own association and freed them from the pressure of the Catholic Priest.

3.9. Multiple Identities

The most fascinating about the PIOs in the island is issue pertaining to Catholic affiliation and Christian names. I was surprised and amazed when I met the temple secretary of the Mahabhadra Kali Association of St.Pierre, her name Jasmine Amogom poullé and her husband Mr. Christian, both had a Christian name. In the midst of our discussion Christian, narrated that the issue of multiple identity i.e. having both Catholic and ethnic Indian name had its roots in the French assimilation policy, the powerful local Catholic Church has told Reunionnais that they cannot be separated from the church, that the baptism is permanent. However, while baptism was never required by law, it was more of a ritual before the 1970’s to be more acceptable in the society and of significant social event necessary for the family's status in society, said the Christian. And When I asked them about, the possibility for the Hindus to get rid themselves of the imposed Christian names and take up their choice, he lamented that changing one's name under French law requires going before a judge and receiving official permission to do so. Names he said, are most commonly changed because of marriage, but can be altered for other reasons. To do so requires proving an *interet legitime*, that is, a legitimate cause warranting a favorable judgment. However, after 1970,s precisely after 1980’s it is not necessary for the new born child to adopt a Christian name. This multiple identity is not to negate their cultural linkages to India, though still a loyal citizen of the French Republic.

For example, a representative of the French Consulate in San Francisco who deals with name changes said he felt the judges "will be softer in Réunion" toward Hindus of Indian descent who wish to reclaim their ancestral heritage for religious reasons. He explained the principal reason for the law on names, which dates back to 1791, was to prevent
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

criminals and debtors from hiding their identity.\(^{83}\) When I personally asked about the above statement that appears in the website, the Temple secretary lamented that this could be another way of legitimising the French policy of Assimilation on the PIOs. In general, French courts have not looked favourably upon changing a French-sounding name back to a foreign name, even when it was the original name of the family. Curiously, one legitimate reason for a change of name is when it indicates a particular national origin, race or religion which everyone knows and the person would rather have a more neutral name. To this one example can be cited here, the treasurer of the Organisation for Diaspora Initiative (ODI) a German national, when she took the French citizenship she has to adopt another name and was therefore called Veronique. However, till date there has been no such petition made by any PIOs in Reunion to change his name for religious reasons.

The mode of name changes allowed since 1985 is to register a "current" first and/or last name with the government. This name will appear on passports and driving licenses, but is not changed on the birth certificate. There are no reports of Hindus in Reunion adopting a "current" Hindu name, though some have taken a second first name, usually in addition to the Christian name.\(^{84}\) Thus this multiple identity of the PIOs in Réunion Island does not prevent their loyalty towards France and at the same time do not bar them from reviving their cultural roots.

Though Christianity becomes a way of acceptable social life and Hinduism becomes the sacred inner identity yet the reform agenda is really strong within the Temple association, a Brahmin priest was recently imported from India to propagated Hinduism among Tamils younger generation. However, the incumbent President of Tamij Sangam was not in favour of importing a Brahmin priest to the island rather he was for maintaining the status quo- by not allowing the Indians priest and opines that the caste-less PIOs society in La Réunion will be stratified once a Brahmin priest is welcome here. He reiterated that, since Hinduism in La Réunion did not recognized Caste system therefore it is not


\(^{84}\) Ibid.
Determinants of transformation from indentured workers to PIO

necessary to import a Brahmin priest rather he was in favour of sending local devotees to be trained as a priest in India, which according to him will placed Hinduism in La Réunion the most unique society in the world.

Thus, we can conclude that, the determinants for the transformation of Indian indentured identity were shaped primarily by the French assimilation policy during the indentured period. The French nationality for PIOs in La Réunion brings a lot of benefits especially for the children like free school, house plan, and possibility to buy land, job, better salary, and perhaps the social security system for the unemployed youth. Christianity which became the social mask for the PIOs to be acceptable in the society began to gradually wane among PIOs in La Réunion with the separation of the political system from religion date from 1905 and thus PIOs in La Reunion till date are governed by this law, earlier Christianity as discussed above was a part of the political system, meaning all the law tended to comply to the Christians rules. PIOs, though under the French system for several decades yet PIO's have retained their cultural traits in some form or the other.

85 The PIOs in La Reunion were granted French citizenship in 1920, according to L.M.Singhvi Report, However, there was a complete unanimity among the PIOs in La Reunion, that it was Probably in 1889, perhaps during the II Republic, Corroborated by NAI.