Chapter: 5
POSITIONING OF PIOs IN RÉUNION IN COMPARISON TO OTHER BRITISH ISLAND

5:1 PIOs during the indentured Period

Mauritius, a former British colony (1810-1968) and before that of French (1710-1810) was discovered by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century and subsequently occupied and abandoned by the Dutch, who exterminated the Dodo, has been an independent state since March 1968 and a Republic within the new commonwealth since March 1992. Located just within the tropic of capricon in the south-western Indian ocean, roughly 800kms east of Madagascar. This chapter will compare and contrast the status of PIOs in terms of economic, political, social and cultural status in Réunion Island Vis-à-vis Mauritius.

5:1.1. Saving

The first remarkable distinction between PIOs of the above mention countries since the colonial period was regards to their saving. The savings brought home to India by return immigrants from Mauritius have averaged during the 1887-1891 was between 135 and 68 Rupees per "statute adults" exclusive of Paupers. The greater number also of those who declare their savings are said to be less well to do Indians. Whereas in La Réunion, the statistics are very poor and imperfect, and all that they show is that in 1887, 1,587 immigrants took home 25,000 Francs and in 1891, 296 took 9,000 Francs per head. The greater parts by far in all cases were "statute adults" and the figure would not be much raised by calculating it strictly upon their number. The greater the numbers of these returned emigrants were, as a matter of fact, practically destitute and those are the tune of all the consular reports from Reunion and Pondicherry.¹

The primary reason for the contrast stated by the administration in Réunion is that only the worn out, bad characters and paupers return to India. Thus in 1886 and 1887 the number of repatriations amounted to six and four percent of the immigrants Indian

¹ Dept of Revenue and Agriculture, Emigration Branch, April 1894.Proceeding No.1-17.part, A.
Positioning of PIOs in Reunion in Comparison to Other British Island populations of those years. While in Mauritius the percentage for the same year's amounts to about two and half and one and two-fourth respectively. Secondly, it is pointed out that whereas two-third of the Mauritius Indians come from Bengal, almost all the Réunion Island immigrants belongs to Madras, and the Madrasi, it is alleged, is of less saving disposition than the Calcutta immigrants. However, statistics of the Natal and Ceylon, countries to which Madrasi immigrants in large number would amply disprove this allegation.²

In Mauritius, there are savings of over 16(sixteen) lakhs of Rupees equivalent to 25,00,000 Francs, belonging to Indians of which 14 lakhs belongs to statute immigrants, the rest to persons who have not come under the Labour laws of the Island. Whereas in Réunion...the labour force the total savings invested in the local banks amounted to some 10,000 Francs.³ Thus, the inferences that can be made from the above description during the indentured period is that, the general condition of the Indian indentured workers in Réunion Island is clearly inferior to that which he enjoys in any British colony, including Mauritius, the sister Island, where the conditions of law, employment and living are generally similar to those obtaining in Réunion. He does not save; exemption from engagement and free settlement are ready, if ever allowed; repatriation is made difficult; and there are special facilities and temptation to drink and a general carelessness as to the moral condition of the engaged labourers. His children are not educated, but under obligation to engage themselves as labourers while still of tender years.

The guarantees for protection during the period of indentured labour are insufficient and unsatisfactory. The government is foreign(unlike British India government), the protective agency is weak ill-paid and dependent, the law is too severe; the cooly is frequently in the “atelier de discipline” for trifling offences; his complaints were not sympathetically received, frequently not even impartially attended to, and he is still in many respects at the mercy of a bad master. It must be added that the abuses above

² Ibid
³ Ibid,p.60.
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described are of long standing, and that there is, or has been hitherto, a reluctance to recognize their existence and to provide the necessary remedies. 4

5:1.2. Planters

The aim of Réunion planters is to manufactures comparatively coarse sugar for the market in France, where the sugar undergoes refinement. The waste product of the manufacturer in La Réunion therefore contains a great deal of saccharine matter, which imparts a superior quality and value to the Rum made from them. The Reunion planter thus relies largely for his profits upon his rum up to the present, for some reason or others, he has exported comparatively little of it, and his profit therefore requires a large home consumption. Whereas in Mauritius, the planters extracts all the crystallisable sugar he can from his cane with the object of turning out a good quality of sugar for consumption, without further refinement, in the Indian and colonial markets. His waste products therefore contain very little saccharine matter and his Rum is bad. He does not, as a rule, distil it himself, but sells it cheap to distillers off the estate who get the bulk of their profit by exportation. Now lets us compare the following figure, which confirms the above arguments.

In Reunion the consumption of Rum at the lowest computation is 1,500,000 litres or about 9 litres per head, and the revenue from home consumption excise duty amounts to 2,160,000 Francs or 48 percent of the total budget. Whereas in Mauritius, the consumption is 1,289,370 litres or about three and half liters per head of the population and the excise is 21 percent of the budget. The exports of the two countries are Réunion less than one-half, the production of which in proportion to its sugar area is very large. 5

5:2. Status of PIOs in Mauritius

The academic concept of the nation as a self-defined people either aspiring to statehood or already in a dominant position in a state, is recent and unusual in Mauritius. Nevertheless, the term 'a nation' —nayson, is still used in at least five different meaning in

4 Ibid, Para No. 228.
5 Ibid, p. 78.
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the Island: 1) Jati or Caste, 2) Ethnic community, 3) Race, 4) Language community and, 5) Political community of citizens with a shared identity in some respect, but each of them would divide the Mauritian population into segments along different lines. The caste concept particularly distinguished between bann gran-nayson i.e. high caste and bann tinayson i.e. low caste within the Hindu population. Of the former there are two divisions i.e. Babojee and Maraz, the latter consist of Rajput and Ravi Vod: all of them are relatively small groups and the majority of the Mauritian Hindus belong to the middle caste, the vaish or vaishya. This principle of social differentiation has not only separated high caste from low ones, but it has also contributed to accentuating the difference between Mauritian of North Indian and South Indian origins since the Biharis tend to regards Tamils and Telegus as low-caste people regardless of their actual caste origins.

There is also sanction against intermarriage between all groups, practiced with varying degrees of rigours. Moreover the concept of Indian identity is more expressed in being Bhojpuri than a Tamil or Telegu. Whereas the concept of Nation is completely absent in Réunion Island, the reason being under the French institution there was complete loss of many cultural traits. The PIOs in Réunion, still busied themselves in identity assertion, by forming several cultural and Temple based associations that actively promote Indian cultural tradition.

5.2.1. Political participation

In Mauritius, The Hindi-speaking are the politically dominant groups, and the non-Bihari, Hindus as well as the bann ti-nayson are in general not followers of the Indian dominated parties. As a convention in any parliamentary system of Democracy the strength in numbers of the population always played a crucial part in the political space. Likewise in Mauritius after the introduction of the universal adult suffrage in 1948, PIOs who constitutes nearly 65 percent of the total population enabled them to retain and reproduce forms of local and domestic organisation advantageous in politics. Though some of them who migrated under the French Colonial rule were creolized during the 19th

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century, lost their language and were absorbed into the emergent coloured middle class. Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of these urban migrants have retained their identity as Indians up to these days, and this according to Thomas Hylland Eriksen indicates that throughout the history of Mauritius, and till this day, there has been an economically influential group of respectable citizens of Indian descent. Compared to Réunion and other neighbouring Island, PIOs in Mauritius has by and large been less assimilated. Bhojpuri is largely spoken fairly wide in the north-eastern villages and is understood by many blacks living in these areas. This Island was considered as an element of Indian ancestral culture by most Historians and sociologists.

5:2.2. Cultural Revivalism

The most significant attempt to revive Bhojpuri was taken under the leadership of Sarita Boodhoo, who founded the Bhojpuri Institutes to propagate Bhojpuri as the first step towards reviving Indian identity in this multicultural society. She organized cultural events such as Bhojpuri-language stage shows and plays, as well as concerts with Bhojpuri songs. In the meantime a group of official built upon her efforts, using their influence to start Bhojpuri language television programme on the government controlled Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). She also championed the cause of the PIOs worldwide; World Hindi Secretariat sponsored by the Indian and Mauritian government in Mauritius was also established under her leadership.

The year 1950 also witnessed the first wave of Hindi instructor in the state schools. In order to meet the rapid demand the first post-colonial government headed by Prime Minister Seewosagaur Ramgoolum, embarked upon a policy of hiring Hindi teachers of young PIOs who had completed secondary school and in a few cases only primary school. Many of them owed their knowledge of Hindi to instruction in baithkas,

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8 Ibid.
9 I was particularly amazed that a black African women, a restaurant owner, talk to me in Hindi when I told her that I am from India.
community-organised village evening schools often attached to a Hindu temple and not under state control.\footnote{Ibid, pp.72-73.}

Thus Hindi acts as the main tool for social mobility after the post -Independence Mauritius. For example, a Patrick Eisenlohr study gives us an interesting facet of how Mr.Gungoo’s who grew up in a house with a mud floor and a thatched roof with nine family members. His father worked as a labourer for the local sugar mill, and vegetables farm which they sold at nearby market to supplement their income. In the mid-1950’s Mr.Gungoo, found employment as a Hindi teacher after completing secondary school. He initially taught in two different schools and attended additional training sessions at the Teachers Training College, now the Curriculum Development and Research Unit in Beau Bassin on the weekends. By the time he retired he had attained a position as a deputy head teacher. His home is rather a large concrete frame type; there is a new sofa with a matching chairs and a coffee table in the living room. Souvenirs of trips to India adorn the walls and large televisions, as well as a stereo, which is placed in a cabinet with drawers and glass doors, are in evidence, which is the standard of middle -class lifestyle in present day Mauritius. He also had three sons. One, a primary school teacher, gives private after-hour lesson i.e. tuition, to students in the backyards. Another son is a police officer, while the third is studying for a University degree in Fine arts in Delhi.

Like wise the career of Pundit Ramkhelwan, who grew up in a poor family in the south of the Island. His father was a laburer, who was deeply engaged in the Hindu religious organizations and activities in the village. Pundit Ramkhelwan, used to help his father in gardening, which the family engaged in to supplement its income, while studying for his school Certificate exams. He started learning Hindi at the baithka located right next to his parents’ house and soon became proficient enough to give lesson to other students after school. In school, Hindi and Hinduism were his strongest subjects. When he decided to become a full-time pundit, he already had the necessary requirements to starts a course with the Mauritius Sanatan Dharma Temple Federation, a School certificate diploma and the equivalent of the uttama, that is, the highest level of the Hindi examination conducted by the Hindi Pracharini Sabha in collaboration with the Hindi Sahitya Sammelen in
Allahabad, India. Thus the life story of the above mentioned, according to Patrick Eisenlohr, is the fact that the knowledge of Hindi and the support of the Temple federation, has resulted is a living testimony of the upward social mobility in post – independence Mauritius. 12 Whereas in Réunion Island the knowledge of learning Indian language is still in its nascent stage, a Pundit trained in India has to deliver his lecture in French/Français.

The dominant position of Indians in Mauritius politics was often said to have disturbed by the domestic affairs of India. Muslims formed their own party; the CAM, Comite d’ Action Musulman. Moreover cultural difference between North and south Indian was also discernible at least in the urban areas. Unlike La Réunion, caste division also played an important part in the socio-political life which was often exploited politically. 13 Though Indians in Mauritius are culturally heterogeneous they nevertheless share the common identity in relation to the other non –Indian Mauritius or Creole. These notions are embedded in cultural stereotypes, which are part and parcel of Mauritian culture and can be invoked whenever deemed necessary and ignored or underplayed if need be. For example, the Indian standard view of the blacks is, “He is lazy, sexually immoral, disorganized and essentially stupid. The blacks, or Creoles, on their part, tend to regard the Indians as being too thrifty, sly and cunning, dishonest and boring to the extent that they are unable to enjoy the good things in life.” 14

5.2.3. Creolisation

Creolisation, as it is used by some anthropologists, is an analogy taken from linguistic. 15 The concept of cultural creolisation, introduced in anthropology by Ulf Hannerz, refers to the intermingling and mixing of two or several formerly discrete traditions or cultures. 16 In an era of globalization and IT revolution, creolisation can be identified nearly everywhere in the world, but there are important differences as to the degree of mixing.

12 Ibid, pp.73-74.
The concept has been criticised for essentialising cultures, as if the merging traditions were "pure" at the outset. Although this critique may sometimes be relevant, the concept nevertheless helps making sense of a great number of contemporary cultural processes, characterised by movement, change and fuzzy boundaries. This discipline in turn took the term from a particular aspect of colonialism, namely the uprooting and displacement of large numbers of people in the plantation economies of certain colonies, such as Louisiana, Jamaica, Trinidad, Réunion and Mauritius. Both in the Caribbean basin and in the Indian Ocean, certain or all groups who contributed to this economy during slavery were described as creoles.

5.2.3.1. Different concept of Creol-Criollo

Originally, a criollo meant a European, normally a Spaniard, born in the New World, as opposed to peninsulars; today, a similar usage is current in La Réunion, where everyone born in the Island, regardless of skin colour, is seen as créole, as opposed to the zoreils, who were born in metropolitan France and the Indians or Asian in particular. In Trinidad, the term creole is sometimes used to designate all Trinidadians except those of Asian origin. In Suriname, a creole is a person of African origin, while in neighbouring French Guyana a creole is a person who has adopted a European way of life. In spite of the differences, there are some important resemblances between the various conceptualisations of "the Creole", which resonate with the theoretical concept of creolisation: Creoles are uprooted, they belong to the New World, are the products of some form of mixing, and are contrasted with that which is old, deep and rooted. This contribution sets out to discuss the concept of the creole -- related both to language and to people -- as it is used in Mauritius, and then relate the Mauritian situation to the general use of the concept of creolisation.

In spite of obvious cultural creolisation evident throughout Mauritian society, it is traditionally the Mauritians of African and/or Malagasy descent who are classified locally.
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as Creoles. Indeed, already in the 1850s, Rev. Patrick Beaton, entitled his book on Mauritius "Creoles and Coolies,"\(^{20}\) contrasting the two major groups of African and Indian descent, respectively. This is no accident, he argued and therefore he opines that the Mauritian classification connects well with the theoretical concept of cultural creolisation.

The ancestors of Mauritian creoles were slaves from different parts of Africa and Madagascar, brought there between 1715, the beginning of French colonisation and 1810, when the slave trade was banned. Like in other plantation colonies based on slavery, slave owners in Ile-de-France, as Mauritius was called during French rule, mixed individuals from different ethnic groups together, dissolving family structures and forms of political organisation. As a result, in a given compound, there were few shared collective cultural resources; no shared language, no shared kinship structure, cosmology or traditional system of social organisation that might have been transplanted and eventually reproduced. Thus the degree of cultural continuity in the slave groups was by default limited. Like in similar setups elsewhere in the world, particular in the Caribbean, a Creole language developed quickly, using French vocabulary, a modified pronunciation and a simplified grammar.

In Bernardin de St Pierre’s travel book from 1773, *Voyage à l’Ile de France*, fragments of the so-called patois spoken by the slaves is cited in a few places, and it was clearly structurally similar to the creole spoken in Mauritius today.\(^{21}\) However, Ramoo, who is a Hindu Tamil in his late forties and lives in Rose-Hill, talks about the changes in the relations between Creoles and Tamils of Christian background, who are often considered part of the Creole community by the Hindu and Hindu Tamils: “During my childhood in Rose hill, before independence, I remember the Hindus, the endyens, and we, the tamuls, were at the very bottom. One of our neighbours who was a Christian and my father always addressed him with Missye, but always called my father using his last name only,

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\(^{20}\) See, Beaton, Patrick (1977 [1859]) *Creoles and Coolies, or Five Years in Mauritius*. London: Kennikat.

even though at work his rank was below my father. People looked down on us tamuls and the endyens. Today thing have changed. Christian Tamil girls now marry Hindu Tamils and see it as a step upwards. Their own families have no money and no education. Men have no works, drink at the butik, and borrow money from you. Then the girls see what kind of respect endyen women enjoy. The girls move up and join the Indian mainstream”.

5.3 Religious and Cultural Activities

Unlike Réunion Island, Mauritian planters from the inception of the indenture system provided every facility for the immigrants to practice their faith without any hindrance. As early as 1867, a Siva temple was built in a village in the North of the Island called Gokula. In 1872 the great Jumma Mosque, was completed and this fine building is a tribute to the grace and elegance of Muslim Art. Some of the prominent festivals celebrated by PIOs are Durga Puja, Holi, Dipavali, and the Shivratri. The Ekkadasi and the Ramnaumy are observed mostly by the women. The Tamils celebrated the Fire Walking ceremony and the Muslims Eid.

5.3.1. Baitka

Another unique feature of the PIOs in Mauritius is that on every settlement or estate there is a village club called Baitka, the platform on which the panchayat functioned. Baithka, conducted several religious and social function most importantly the Katha which is celebrated to mark the religious sanctity of the Bhagavat, held generally around the Christmas time. During these occasion PIOs from all walks of life come together to listen to the Priest sermon based on the Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata. PIOs in Mauritius also have Drama association like Ramlilas and Indra Sabha. Muharram, popularly known

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as *Tajiah*, on occasional of national rejoicing where the celebration last till the dawn of the morning usually marked by wrestling of the able bodied man of the Island.²⁶

5.3.2. Arya Samaj

With the advent of the Arya Samaj movement in the early 1920's followed by the formation of the Indian Cultural Association in April 1936, under the leadership of R.K. Boodhun, the main objective being the advancement of Indians in Mauritius and cement a close relationship between the East and West and to further this objective Indian Cultural Review was also published. Many philosopher and political leaders also joined this association mention may be made of Rabindranath Tagore and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan.²⁷ The later also earned the epitome of a Saint in Mauritius. Moreover, not only Hinduism but also Christianity has played a major role in transforming the socio-economic status of PIOs in Mauritius. The Indian Commissioner commenting on the influence of Catholic Church wrote that: “The Christian church has always played a noteworthy part in the social and religious life of the Indian people. Its contribution has been particularly valuable in the fields of education and of medical aid. The educational institutions and the hospital run by Christian missionaries in the various parts of India have met the pressing need of an appreciable section of the Indian people. The effect of the Christian Church in removing some of the glaringly iniquitous social customs has also been healthy in the Indian society”.²⁸

There are also instances of conflict of interest and ideas among pundits who came from India and the local pundit. As described by the Mauritian local pundit who belongs to high caste narrates that: “The Indians pundits have become a real problem. They preached in differently and conduct different rituals, and even say that what we Mauritian pundits do is incorrect. We really have to work against this because we follow the principles of *lok achar*, *kul achar*, and *desh achar* [customs of the people, customs of the descent group and customs of the country]. Every country has its particularities in ritual, and what is valid in India does not need to be correct here.”²⁹

Moreover, members of the mid-ranking and politically and numerically dominant Vaish caste had alone opposed the monopoly of the Babuji-Maraz over the official priesthood among

“orthodox” Sanatanis, as opposed to the followers of the Arya samaj, in Mauritius, which the latter previously enforced by their control over the Mauritius Sanatan Dharma Temple Federation.\(^{30}\) This change was evident after the Anerood Jugnauth took over power from Seewoosagur Ramgoolam in 1982. Now the Vaish took over the management of the Temple affairs from the Babuji-Maraz and removed the caste bars to priesthood. This followed and era when the Indians pundits began to train the pundits from the Vaish background.\(^{31}\)

5:3.3. Cultural identity

Firmly attached to their culture, the early Indians in this country preserved what they remembered of it, this was made possible through the recollection of Indian classics such as Tulsidas’s Rama Charit Manasand the more popular Hanuman Chalisa. With dhal and dholak, ektara and ghungroo, they consoled themselves reciting them, or hearing them sung, after each day of labour in the cane fields. A make shift temple was invariably constructed in every plantation.

5.3.3.1. Folk Dance

Folk dances and folklores music was part of the life of the indentured Indians, whatever their religion, in the new and torturous and in which they found themselves. Initially belonging to the poor and uneducated working classes, they often carried with their bundled belongings, only imprecise memories of the customs and traditions that their families back home had handed down to them. The various rites of passage through life – birth, marriage, death – and the recurring festivals were all observed by them in their mutated form, to be passed on in turn to their own children and grandchildren in the fullness of time.

5.3.3.2. Shivratri

The Hindu pilgrim’s purificatory dip in the holy waters of the Ganga evolved into a novel local custom. In preparation for Shivaratri, pilgrims from every corner of the Island congregate at Grand-Bassin - a volcanic rock formation in which some Ganga water had apparently been added - carrying their kanwars on their shoulders. After collecting some water from this Ganga Talaw, they return to their homes to perform abhisheka in their shivalayas. Ram Nawmi, Durga Puja, Diwali, Karwa Chauth, Phagwa - the local name for Holi, as it comes in the month of Phalgun - is all observed by most ethnic Indians with due pomp and ceremony. It is not only the North Indian festivals that are widely observed and celebrated in Mauritius. Varsha Parappu, the Tamil New Year has been included in the list of public holidays.

In the same way, Ugadi, the Telugu, Marathi and Kannada New Year were celebrated. The continuing and widespread influence of the culture and traditions of Bhojpuri migrants to Mauritius is of course both natural and clearly visible as they form the largest component of the local Indian Diaspora. Their influence is reflected across the board in practically every facet of life of the ‘Indo-Mauritians’ – their rites and rituals, dietary habits, culinary specialities, the making of sweets, the use of spices, the style of clothing and jewellery, folklore, religious practices and so on. Commonly used words from the Bhojpuri language (in their local adaptation) are not only understood and in common parlance by the other PIOs but also by the Creoles, and even by those whose mother tongue is English or French. Words like batchara and tamassa, roti and faratha, bhajiya and samoussa, are in general used by all Mauritians.32

5.3.3.3. Hook-Swinging

Hook-swinging usually observed by the low caste in Madras presidency such as Pariahs, pallies and pillars is a common Cultural tradition in Mauritius. The patrons of the rituals

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were Lord Shiva and his consorts, Durga, who protected the Bhagatas or devotees from injury during the swinging process. J.H.Powell alluded to the origin of the ritual:

"Siva and Durga were born not as children, but came into the world as grown man and woman, in a place called Kailas-parbad. This supernatural arrival was made known only to a poor Brahman and his wife who were childless... [Shiva] said that he was a god who gave children and rice crops. The Brahman replied that if he would give him a child as well as rice he would be his follower, to which Shiva consented, and told him that he would have to perform the Charakpuja [Hook-Swinging] according to the methods which he then showed him...the people of the village decided to make trial of Shiva’s power, so they erected a staging and carried out the instructions given as regards hook-swinging, the Brahman acting as priest while the lower castes of the people were being “swung”. While this ceremony was in progress Shiva appeared to the Brahman, with whom he was very angry for having started the ceremony without his permission, whereupon the Brahman asked forgiveness and pleaded ignorance, saying he did not know when the god wanted puja [religious ceremony] to start. Three days after this [performance of the puja following Shiva’s precise instruction] the Brahman’s wife gave birth to a child". 33

This ceremony was preceded by three days of fast with certain rituals. During the ritual, the Bhagatas adorned with garlands of flowers and with hooks impaled in the fleshy portions of their backs, were swung from the longer end of the stout pole pivoted on a firmly planted upright thirty to forty feet above the ground.

Thus Religious practices among the PIOs cover practically the whole spectrum that is to be found in India. Some Scholars even suggested that the pristine form of Indian culture and religious traditions can be found here from the followers of different Hindu sect. Among them mentioned may be made of the Santana Dharma and the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna and Chinmaya Missions, Shivananda Yogashram and Brahmakumari Raja Yoga Centre, Sai Baba Mandirs and Sat Chit Anand Society, Kabir Panths and Guru Singh Sabhas, Maharishi Maheshyogi’s TM Centres and International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Various Muslim sects are also found here. Adherents of the Islamic faith are represented on the Island by Shias and Sunnis, Bohras and Ahmedis, Memons, followers of the ‘Sunnat Jamaat’ and also of the ‘Tahwide’. And then there are,

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as already noted earlier, the Indian Christians that the French took to Mauritius from
different parts of India, and the descendants of the original migrants.34

5.3.4. Activities of Muslim PIOs in Mauritius

The Camp des Lascars Mosque was the first, and so is the oldest, mosque in Mauritius. It
has undergone considerable changes over the years to meet the needs of a growing
congregation. It is no longer the small lime-washed structure it was during the days of
French rule. It has been expanded and renovated regularly over the years to satisfy the
growing demands of an ever-growing congregation that continues to plod its way daily to
its old beloved roof for worship and meditation. However, the site of the Mosque
occupied is the same. It is the living symbol of the spiritual and cultural awareness of
those lascars who, in the face of tremendous odds, sowed the seed of Islam in Mauritius,
and which has kept on flourishing till today. The mosque also testifies, to some extent,
the spirit of tolerance and understanding shown by Governor Decaen towards the
Muslims and their religion. That magnanimity was, however, in keeping with the new
spirit ushered in by the epoch-making revolution in France in 1789, which had also
impacted in Ile de France.

5.3.4.1. Historical roots

The immigration of indenture workers from India continued with brief lapses till 1922 -
by that time 450,000 labourers were brought into the colony. Of that number, a good
many chose to return to India at the expiry of their indenture while many others opted to
stay behind and settle in the colony. Those who stayed either renewed their indenture or
worked for their own account as daily wage workers or in small trades. In 1835 the PIO’s
in Mauritius formed only a minor segment of the total population but a decade later, they
reckoned to almost a third and about twenty years later that fraction swelled to two thirds
- a proportion that has been maintained to this day with the Indo-Mauritians - Muslims

MMJ:indiandiaspora.nic.in/diasporapdf/chapter5.pdf+indians+in+mauritius&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=5&lr=lan
g_en.
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included - forming the majority segment of the population. However, the Muslims by themselves represent a minority - about 17 percent of the Mauritian population.35

5.3.5. Poly-ethnic Society

In a polyethnic society the most profound indicator that the fundamental aspect of ethnicity is the very act of communicating and maintaining cultural difference. Here in Mauritius though there are numerous ethnic identities, PIOs are being able to maintain their distinct cultural identity. The women unlike the Creole and African origin still maintained Indian tradition by wearing saris, married women's with sindoor and bangles.

According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, the cultures of all the ethnic groups in Mauritius are creolised to a greater or lesser extent.36 The Bhojpuri, for example, vernacular spoken by many of the Indo-Mauritians has been so strongly influenced by other languages that it is unintelligible to Bhojpuri-speakers in Bihar, and the Franco-Mauritians – like all other Mauritians – eat spicy curries and lots of rice. Nearly every Mauritian speaks a French-based creole language (Kreol) fluently, and it is the mother-tongue of a substantial majority. Regarding lifestyle, consumption and way of life in general, it is easy to demonstrate the effects of mutual influence between the ethnic groups that make up the Mauritian population, as well as cultural influence from the outside world – not merely from the West, incidentally, but also from India and East Asia.

This Poly-ethnic society also shows a very interesting aspect of the social life. For example Patrick Eisenlohr, case study of the La Nicolieri stated that People living in that village differentiate between urban Creole, who they see as mostly living in cities and certain poor suburbs of Port Louis such as Roche-Bois, and the Creole families living in their community.37 He argued that although there is a little socialising between the few Creoles living in La Nicolerie and local Hindus, the latter generally consider the Creoles

good neighbour and different from the urban Creoles. One Creole man was even popular enough to be elected to the village council of this overwhelmingly Hindu locality. While some neighbour considered this evidence of their tolerance towards ethnic others stressing that it showed they had nothing against Creoles, they also points out that there were few tensions with the local Creole because the latter were influenced by living in a predominantly Hindu environment. Several residents of La Nicolerie noted with approval that the family of the Creole village councilor would decorate their home with strings of electric lights on the festival of Divali, in the manner of their Hindu neighbour. This imagined relationship of inter-ethnic influences, the local Creoles if they live in another environment as mentioned above, were decent who have work and houses. However the Creoles in the city forgets it, can also works inversely, he added.

5.3.6. Imagine Identity

Creating a Indian identity by drawing on presumed features of Indian ancestral traditions often involves moral discourses about having superior economic and family ethics as compared to those of others group opines Patrick Eisenlohr. The PIOs in Mauritius eagerly seize on example of the Indians achievement in India or western countries to vindicate the positive characteristics of their self image vis-à-vis other groups. For instance, “in September 1998, the visit· of Lord Meghnad Desai, member of the British House of Lords, and Director of the center for Global governance at the London School of Economics, was widely covered on state run television. For people in La Nicolerie, a Indian dominant village, who followed the events, the fact that he was a Hindu and Indian was by far the most noteworthy aspects of Desai’s visit, and prompted expressions of pride among them, the reason being they were very impressed by an Indian having attained such pre-eminent and prestigious position even in a European country. “Sitting in front of the television one of the neighbor contrasted this instance of what he considered as Indian success…with what he saw as a typical Creole lifestyle in Mauritius. They [Creole] just want to party and have fun (maja karo) and they will not be able to get

38 Ibid, p.102.
39 Ibid, p.103.
Positioning of PIOs in Reunion in Comparison to Other British Island

where he {Desai} is the way they live. Thus this was the way how a powerful image was contextualized by PIO’s in Mauritius to create ethnic boundaries in Mauritius.

5.4. Official Language

According to the 2000 Census, the figure for French in the category of “language usually spoken at home” is 3.38 percent and 6.40 percent, if those are included who claimed to use it alongside another language, here mostly Creole. Stein claims an unlikely figure of 21 percent for the French used at home. A finding strongly dispute by Baker, who points to the 1972 Census figure of 4.8 percent. De Robillard, states that 50-60 percent of the populations have a reasonable competence in French, by virtue of being exposed to it in the school system and the mass media. However, stein again argued that 65.1 percent out of his sample of 720 people claimed to have a “good knowledge” of French. Thus the French language was used only in formal context.

English the language of the former colonial power, Britain, has been retained as the language of state power and administration and as an educational medium since its Independence in 1968, but it is rarely ever used by Mauritian in everyday conversation. French, however, is dominant in the private sector economy and in the print media: it is also the language most used in television and radio programming originating in Mauritius. Thus, scholars have concluded that the language situation is less complicated after all, with Creole featuring in everyday conversation, English and French used as language of literacy, state power, business and mass media. Peter Stein, the most prominent Mauritian language scholar opines that “only three languages are of general interest: Creole, French and English.” However, of late the consciousness of language among Indians also made a great stride and slowly it has penetrated the entire commercial establishment.

40 Ibid, pp.105-106.
41 Stein,(1982),p.545
5.4.1. Indian Language

Though the lack of state support for Kutch and Hakka, and the minimal state support in the case of Gujarati, are actually used in everyday conversation by small numbers of Mauritians. Almost all speaker of Kutchi and the majority of users of Gujarati are Muslims, whose ancestors migrated to Mauritius as free traders, and who still maintain a very active network of trade, kinship and marriage with Gujarati and other parts of India. Muslims in Mauritius, however, regardless of their regional origins in India, are supposed to claim Urdu, also increasingly as Arabic, as their ancestral language. Only the minority of Hindus of Gujarati origin, who mainly came to Mauritius as employees of one of the trading companies owned by Muslims Gujarati families, place any official claim on Gujarati as their patrimony. Apart from occasional television and radio programming by the government-controlled Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation, there is no policy of supporting Gujarati.

5.4.1.1. Hindi

Of all the ancestral languages claimed by Mauritians, Hindi is by far the most significant. According to 1994, statistics of the Ministry of education, 39.3 percent of all Mauritian primary school students were enrolled in Hindi classes. The percentage of enrolment for other Asian ancestral language were much lower: Urdu 13.6 percent, Tamil 6.1 percent, Telegu 2.2 percent, Marathi 1.6 percent, Arabic 2.6 percent and Modern Chinese (Mandarin) 1.1 percent. All in all 66.6 percent of all primary school students received instruction in these languages on an ethnic basis. On the secondary school level this figure was 29.8 percent. Even though enrollment numbers were significantly lower for secondary schools, Hindi's predominance over other ancestral languages was even more pronounced, accounting for the enrollment of 22.9 percent of the total students' population.

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46 See Patrick Eisenlohr, 2006(b).
5.4.1.2. Hindi as a tool for political power

Officially, the Mauritian constitution recognized four communities in the country: Hindus, Muslims, Sino-Mauritians, and the general population, comprised of everyone not belonging to the three other groups, in effect, Creoles and Franco-Mauritians. Thus Hindi is regarded as the ancestral property of the largest and politically most powerful subgroups.48 The Franco-Mauritian MMM leader Paul Beranger is the only exception, the rest belongs to this community. Paul who became the Prime Minister in September 2003- succeeding Anerood Jugnauth, who had held the post from 1982-1995 and from 2000-2003- as part of a coalition agreement with Anerood Jugnauth’s MSM party. Despite his past Leftist pro-Mauritian Creole militant and labor organizer in the 1970s and early 1980s Beranger has become known as a neo-liberal in economic policy and as a conservative promoter of ethnicised ancestral traditions and “cultural centers”. He has often been mocked for his habit of wearing formal Indian dress when attending functions related to the celebration of Indo-Mauritian “ancestral cultures”. Therefore the Hindus do not expect him to challenge the ethnic composition of the state apparatus, and he is widely respected among Mauritian for his skill in managing the country’s economy and state finances. Thus his ancestry is seen as crucially contributing factor, facilitating contacts with the country’s Franco-Mauritian business elite, based on the widely shared racial stereotype of white having superior management and organizational skills.

Franco-Mauritian, approximately 1 percent of the population, is widely considered an ethnically “invisible” community in Mauritius. With the exception of Beranger, who started his career as a leftist rebel against the Franco-Mauritian establishment, they do not enter official politics in post-colonial Mauritius, knowing well that their overwhelming economic power is sufficient to safeguard their interests. Thus, we can say that the implications of a Prime Minister of Franco-Mauritian ancestry for Mauritius are very different from those of the Creole or Muslims Prime Minister. The latter two scenarios would indeed constitute a severe challenge to the political status quo. In July 2005, the coalition headed by Beranger lost the general election to the Labour Party, and Navin

Ramgoolam, who had already held the post from 1995-2000, again becomes the Prime Minister.

5.5. Status of PIOs in La Réunion

Indians Diaspora in Réunion Island is often referred to as Tamil Diaspora by scholars like Ghassarian and Marimoutu. Settled in this relatively isolated Island since the second part of the last century, PIOs particularly the Tamils have developed some patterns of behavior that are not quite those of their ancestors from Tamil Nadu nor those of the other inhabitants of La Réunion. Anthropological investigations nevertheless show that despite a strong policy of acculturation and assimilation led by the French administration on the populations transferred to the Island, PIO’s particularly the Tamil have managed to maintain, in an adapted manner, most of their ancestral conceptions and practices. An examination at some of these conceptions and practices allows catching a glance at the strengths and adaptive resources of the Tamil culture. 49

Devoid of any inhabitants three centuries ago, La Réunion has been a French colony until 1946, when it became a French Department however there are certain myth and oral tradition that attributes that this Island was first discovered by Indian Merchants. Like its neighbor Mauritius, La Réunion was originally constituted to produce sugar. On both Islands we find the same varied population of European, African, Indian, Chinese, Malagasy and Comores descent; each subgroup arriving in the Island under different circumstances. Yet, while these two societies, usually called "the sister Islands," have both been managed in a coercive manner by the French government in La Réunion and by the British government in Mauritius, they have developed very differently because the two colonizing countries had a different approach of colonization. 50


5.5.1. Assimilation of Indian identity

Unlike Mauritius, La Réunion, since the beginning of the immigration, the French government and the catholic missionaries made everything to assimilate the populations under its control. The main political aim was to exploit the resources of the Island, while allowing and pressuring the indentured workers to become "French". As a result, descendants of Indian immigrants are today heavily involved in the French culture. If we neglect their physical characteristics and patronymics, they are simply French citizens, like other members of this multicultural society. Yet, despite their important adaptation to the public life of La Réunion society PIOs still do not eat beef, which denotes a typical Hindu attitude. In reality, despite more than one hundred years of settlement on the Island, they have retained many ancestral patterns of belief and behaviour in their private lives.

The PIOs particularly Tamil, striking a middle path have retained in the family and community spheres they manage their life between the Indian and the French world-view. This manifest through the changes and continuity in the present context of their daily life in the religious spheres and in the language. In order to understand the situation of PIOs in La Réunion.

5.5.2. Indentured identity

The great majority of Indian workers coming to La Réunion originated from South India, particularly from French settlements in Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Karikal. A mistaken appellation in the nineteenth century led Westerners to designate all the people of South India as "Malabar". This was more so because the main port of embarkation was located in the Malabar Coast of the Indian peninsula. This term, accordingly applied by the French to Indian indentured workers migrating to La Réunion, has been kept by the latter to label their own identity.

52 HLC Reports Chapter 6.p.68.
Positioning of PIOs in Reunion in Comparison to Other British Island

The land reform system introduced by the British like commercialisation of agriculture, Zamindari, Ryotwari etc system resulted in large scale famine, created a conducive atmosphere for the middlemen to persuade British Indian citizens to migrate to Réunion Island. The immigration agents promise to them, being able to return home with enough wealth to begin life anew. However, the real situation as per J Grant, the Protector of immigrants at Calcutta on the Notes on immigration wrote that “It seems a hard thing that chance should decide whether an Indian subject should find his way to Mauritius and Natal or to Reunion. In the first two colonies the life of the coolies seems in every way happy, in the last the reverse...He imagines he is going to a country which enjoys just laws, but he finds himself stranded in an Island where the laws is for Creole and against the Indian”. 53 Thus the recruitment of laborers was principally from the lower rungs of the social hierarchy, and since they were intended for the arduous work in the sugar cane fields, the women’s recruit among them were relatively few, from 1848 to 1883, around 80 percent of the PIOs to La Réunion were men. 54

5.5.3. Predial Slavery

The daily life of these immigrants was very harsh, for the labour relations in this society were shaped by a past of slavery. Lord Lytton Her Majesty Ambassador at Paris letter to M.Goblet, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Jan 1889 File No 4 Of 1888, wrote that “It is clearly established that there is much oppression and that many abuses are connected with the whole system of immigration in Reunion: that the general tendency is to subordinate the right of the immigrants to the interest of the colonist; that the Indians has no security of obtaining equal justice at the hands of the colonial administration, and that the position of an affairs complained of arises very much from the intimate connection existing between the syndics or the members of the syndicat protecteur and the planting interest in the Island. This connection go far to account for the fact that protests and representations produce no material effect and to explain why even with the cooperation of the French government, It is almost impossible to ensure reforms being introduced in the administration of emigration in Reunion Island”. 55

53 Dept of Revenue and Agricultural, Emigration Branch, Jan 1887, ProsNo.16-22.
Moreover, the obligation of the French government on the part of repatriating the time expire indentured workers were also not fulfilled as they are ought to be, by the convention of 1861, the bulk of those who are repatriated reach India in abject poverty; also that the sum voted by the Conseil general for the immigration service continues to be reduced and that further reduction are contemplated. Initially, the engagement contract lasted for five years and the indentured workers intended to return to their homeland after this period. Yet, the majority of the landowners did not respect the terms of the contract and routinely pressed their employees to extend their work period in violation of the article IX clause 4 of the Convention of 1861 which reads as follows “if he (the immigrants) consents to contract a new engagement, he will be entitled to a bounty and will retain his right to a return passage at the expiration of such second engagement”. “the right of the immigrants to a return passage extends to his wife and to his children who quitted India under the age of 10 years as well as to those born in the country.”

Consul Bennet, in his report for 1890 also condemned the system as being radically bad this is what he said “Many Indians, heartily weary of waiting in the depots re-engaged and seduced away by the offer of a large bounty which frittered and drunk away in a week keeps them bound hand and foot to their new master from one to four years. The bounty system is radically bad...A few months after signing, the bounty-paid Indians finds he has a bad berth and wants to change his employer smilingly consents but says and naturally referred “refund your unearned bounty” and the only alternative for the Indians is to continue work or to engage elsewhere and repay his old employer and of his new bounty. In the latter case he is a heavy loser, in the former an unwilling worker who is likely to very soon too well acquainted with the atelier de discipline Known as Macadam”. Again in a letter No.28, dated 15th Oct.1892, Consul Bennet expatiates on the evil of the system as follows “By the fact of receiving a bounty for a number of years payable in advance the Indian becomes bound to the soil as firmly as a serf was under the feudal system and as a serf he obtains his release, if at all, by time and forfeiture until his engagement is over. when all the controlling parties are of British Nationality, the system may, and I believed does not result in a permanent benefit to the Indians, but when, as in

56 Ibid. Dec, 1902, Pros, No.4 and 5 Part A.
57 Dept of Commerce and Industry, Emigration Branch Jan, 1907, ProsNo.9-14.
Positioning of PIOs in Reunion in Comparison to Other British Islands

Reunion, a foreign element is introduced, it can only lead except in special cases, to friction, abuses and predial slavery.”

Toiling from ten to twelve hours a day, the contract labourers also suffered under a new hierarchical relationship regarding the white landowners and their supervisors. Although they were "free" and "voluntary workers", they experienced bad treatment, and sometimes physical punishments. Their wages were also often delayed or simply withheld. Moreover, they were virtually banned from practicing their "Hindu" religion. PIOs were disillusioned and many of them tried to escape revolt or even commit suicide.

Consul St.John in his report to the Secretary of State, Despatch No.7. the 15th Dec.1888 dated Reunion, has reported 19 (Nineteen) Suicide cases for the year 1886, the latter reads “It is often difficult to account for suicide, the following story related to me by one of the great planters is curious: a number of suicide had taken place on his estate; but he observed that it is always by hanging and on the same tree, so one day he had the tree cut down and thus put an end to further suicides”. Escaping or dying were two means of ending -- in a definitive manner -- the contract with their employer.

5.5.3.1. Condition of PIOs under the indentured system

Numerous complaints, describing the non compliance with the conventions governing the living conditions of the South Indian coolies on the Island, were sent by the immigrants to the British Consulate, since the majority of them were British subjects and so supposed to be protected under British law. In 1876, on the receipt of Consul Perry’s reports, it was decided to close immigration unless a Commission of enquiry was at once appointed. Capt.Miot and Sir F.Goldsmid visited Reunion Island and drew a report which has been very fully noted on by Mr, later on sir, C.J.Lyall. This report was dealt with by

58 Dept of Revenue and Agricultural, Emigration Branch, March 1893, Pros No.1-14.
60 Dept of Revenue and Agricultural, Emigration Branch, July 1888 Pros No.12-21.
62 Ibid
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Government of India (GoI) in their dispatch No.10 of 18th May 1879, in which the position of the GoI in respect to Reunion immigrants and the abuses existing in the Island are shown in some detail. In Para two of the dispatch it said “The condition of Indian immigrants in Reunion is one of extreme demoralization and disorder, and we have incurred a grave responsibility in allowing such a state of things to arise and continue so long without earlier decisive efforts to remedy it”. Consequently, in 1882, the British India Government suspended the agreement on immigration they had with the French, on the basis of the reports of the Consuls that there were numerous abuses and violation with an official notification No.249, dated Simla the 8th Nov.1882, that reads “In accordance with the provision of section 57 of the Indian Emigration Act 1871, the Governor General in Council is pleased to declare that emigration to the French colony in Reunion shall cease and be prohibited from the date of notification”. While preventing more immigration, that decision did not improve the situation of the workers already on the Island. Indeed most of the landowners did everything within their means to keep the Indian labour force on their plantations, most particularly by delaying the departure of the ships and non-payment of wages for several months. Consul St.John to the Governor of Reunion in a letter reads as follows, “I have the honour to bring to your notice that for some time past continued complaints are being made at this office by Indians employed by Mr.Pelagaud for non-payment of wages due to them for many months...to substantiate these facts I would refer you to complain papers (copies to be found at the immigration office) numbered 30,35,46,56,57,58,61 and 75 of last year and number 6 of the present year all emanating from this consulate” and a subsequent letter by Consul St.John to Governor of Reunion, dated 21st Feb 1888 reads as “With reference to my recent against Mr.Pelagaud, I have the honour to inform you that for some time past rumors have been in circulation that this gentlemen, when a mule, an ox or a sheep dies on his estate, is in the habit of having its throat cut and the carcass offered for sale to the Indians...and another letter by the consul to the protector of the immigrants at St.Denis read as follows “I have been told by several person that a number of Indians employed on Mr.Pelagaud’s estate have complained that their engagiste has supplied them with rotten potatoes instead of Rice” and levying of taxes which would return the laborers to their homeland at the completion of their contracts by re-engaging the time expire indentured labourers, J Grant, the Protector of immigrants at Calcutta in his letter no. 2129 dated

63 Notes on Indian immigration to Reunion, Dept of Revenue and Agricultural, Emigration Branch, Jan 1887, Pros No.16-22.
64 Dept of Revenue and Agricultural Emigration Branch, May 1883, Pros No.38-47.
65 Dept of Revenue and Agricultural Emigration Branch, Aug, 1888, Pros No.18-24.
Calcutta the 17th Sept 1886 to the Officiating secretary to the Government of Bengal General Dept. wrote that "I have gathered from coolies who have at different times lately arrived from Reunion that their wages were subjected to deductions, not only for absence from work on account of illness and other causes, and for what was arbitrarily considered insufficient or defective work, but also on account of a tax at the rate of four annas per mensem, which was imposed on them for the repairs of roads in the district where they labored". 66

Thus, even when the workers were fortunate enough to complete their contract and get their wages, many of them often had to wait several months before gaining passage on a boat back to India, notably Bengal and Tamil Nadu. The repeated postponement of their departure often obliged them to spend all their savings and to accumulate new debts that, ultimately, forced them to remain in the Island and seek a new contract either with their former employer or another. 67 The majority of Indian indentured workers could not return to India at the end of their contracts.

5.5.4. Social Life

Culturally uprooted and experiencing very harsh living conditions, PIOs had to adapt them and to develop a new way of life in response to the different needs and obligations they faced in this new social and cultural context. This brief description of the coercion they experienced in the past was necessary in order to understand the behaviour they exhibit today on the Island. 68 The gender imbalance among PIOs did not allow all of them to preserve and to transmit their identity. Since a great number of men could not find an Indian spouse, they married women of African or European origin. This explains why many people in La Réunion today have ethnic Indian name without any corresponding adherence to Indian values. Among PIOs, those who could marry an Indian woman were able to maintain their original culture in their private life and to transmit it to their descendants. This criterion of ethnic endogamy is very important in

66 Ibid, Sept 1880, Pros No, 41-55.
68 Ibid.
understanding Indian culture or practices on the Island today: only people whose ancestors have strictly intermarried among Indian continue Indian values. However, one must deal with the dominant system of the host society. In multicultural society, when the traditional values do not match with those of the larger society, people necessarily develop some adaptive measures. Today if we look at some aspects of the public presentation of the body, the religious attitude, and the language, we can understand how PIOs have managed their way in this alien French context, without losing the basic principles of their original world view.\(^{69}\)

Despite their status as "free workers" they experienced a situation very close to that of their predecessors (slavery) in the plantations. They had to comply with strong authoritarian behaviour and even to endure some harsh treatment from the white landowners. Moreover, because of the French policy to "civilise" the populations under its control, be it language, clothing Indian immigrants had to avoid any outward expression of their difference. They therefore had to adapt to the dominant culture by adopting western dress and other lifestyle from the plantation field itself. On the religious front too they had certain restriction, by not allowing them to perform ritual openly but were sent to church, to wear western clothes and to speak the language associated with their status.\(^{70}\) This was in contravention to the law of contract signed in 1861.

5.5.4.1. Ornaments

As for ornaments, they did not disappear because of their auspiciousness in Indian conceptions. The only difference with saris is that the ornaments began to be appreciated by the Creole and the white. They put on the ears, the fingers, the wrists and the neck.\(^{71}\) Another persistence of Indian manners can be observed in the way Indian women put up their hair in a bun, which, in an auspicious attitude, they still wear long. Among other Indian ways maintained in La Réunion, we can also mention the usual taking off the shoes when entering the house and the constant concern with pollution leading to

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\(^{69}\) Ibid.


\(^{71}\) Ghasarian, C. (1997)
frequent cleaning of the feet and hands with water. These details reveal the prevalence of some Indian conceptions regarding the body and its presentation in this French society. Today majority of the French and Creoles in La Réunion remove their shoes before entering their house.

5.5.4.2. Hidden Worship

Despite the contractual commitments they had signed, specifying particularly that they could freely practice their own religion; the first PIOs were practically disallowed from praying to their ancestral gods. They thus inevitably involve themselves in a hidden worship coupled with a feeling of guilt and fear toward the Island's dominant culture. Immigrants' disappointment among the PIO's was extreme when they realised that, in fact, everything was set up to convert them to Christianity. When at last PIOs were authorized to build Hindu temples and to officially practice their religion, the great majority of landowners still coerced them to embrace the official and dominant Christian religion, to go to church and to give a Christian first name to their children. As church and administration were intimately linked, the non display of a Christian attitude was criticized and was a bar to integration into mainstream society. A sense of the need to conform outwardly, mixed with an inner strategic attitude, sometimes led the immigrants and their descendants to over compensate in their expected behavior through assimilating certain behavioral patterns of the host society for their own advantages. This is why there are number of PIO's whose first name is "Marie" and "Jean" is today significant. It is even greater among them than other subgroups like the Chinese and Malagasy living on the Island.

5.5.5. Composite culture

The interesting point is that the adoption of Western signs and symbols was integrated into fundamental Hindu conceptions. Concerning names for instance, it is striking that

72 Ibid
74 The President of ODI in La Reunion is called Jean Regis Ramsamy and his wife Marie.
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while they are Christian, the first letter of the second name, the one used by the relatives at home, important for the child to be lucky and under God's protection during his lifetime, is systematically chosen by the parents after consultation with an eminent Hindu priest skilled in Hindu astrology.\textsuperscript{75} Besides, if the children and the parents go to church practically every Saturday or Sunday, they still pray to Hindu gods in temples and act as Hindus when such serious events as birth, marriage, illness and death occur. It is also noted that all the discipline in the church were transformed into Hindu form of worship that gives a very unique features of Hinduism in La Réunion. Although the child is systematically baptised at church, many Hindu protective rituals and auspicious attitudes are respected at, and after, his/her birth.

5.6. The status of language

The third main external adaptation to the prevailing models of society has been linguistic. Creole was and still is a dialect based largely on mixture of French and other local dialect. As discussed in the previous chapter, it was primarily a product of the verbal interaction between the white landowners and their slaves.\textsuperscript{76}

5.6.1. Creole

From the very beginning, Creole was the popular language for communication in everyday life. Like the practice of the Hindu religion, the Tamil language was virtually forbidden on the Island and PIOs had to adopt Creole to accommodate them in society. Creole was in fact the first new language immigrants had to learn. The subsequent development of French education and public schools on the Island allowed PIOs to learn French, the official language of the society. Since the masking of Indian patterns facilitated incorporation into the society, the Indian language particularly the Tamils became less and less favored and was eventually forgotten. Today, it is exclusively used by a few priests who are able to read Hindu scriptures and to recite prayers in the

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temples. But this loss of language did not imply the disappearance of Indian values in the form of speech and practices particularly in the private domains, even though the media of Creole and in lesser degree of French. PIOs still retains Indian values by way of teaching traditional Proverbs to the younger generation.\textsuperscript{77} This shows that a specific system of values and ideas can persist outside the context of its original language of expression.

5.6.2. Tamils

Multicultural societies often create a kind of disjuncture between language and culture.\textsuperscript{78} This is particularly true in La Réunion. Though lost of language is considered lost of culture in Mauritius yet in Réunion Island the trend is the reverse. The fact that none of the PIOs could speak their mother tongue but still the cultural tradition is maintained and enforced through Temple and various local associations. The interesting point is that the principal ideas of the Indian culture have persisted even through the media of Creole and/or French have been the major means of communication. Anthropological study reveals numerous Tamil ways of thinking, particularly proverbs and maxims referring to elders and their advice, in the context of the two adopted languages.\textsuperscript{79} It is also noticed that the prevalence of some fundamental notions of the Indian world view such as cleanliness, purity, honour, protection, devotion, auspiciousness, sacrifice, fate, separation of things, propitiation, the evil eye, dependence, hierarchy, etc., notions that Tamils in La Réunion constantly mention or implicitly refer to in their daily life, are found among the Creoles and the French.\textsuperscript{80}

5.7. Caste System

Unlike Mauritius, in La Réunion due to the physical proximity among the workers, in the cane plantations during the day and in the camps at night, and because of the relative difficulty of marrying exclusively among Indians in the Island, the caste system and its

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid p.10.
\textsuperscript{79} InitiationaLa langueTamoul.[Online:Web]Accessedon24thNov2008.URL.http://www.indereunion.net/util e/langx.htm
rules have lapsed among the PIOs and their descendants. Moreover, oral tradition has it that majority of the migrants during the indentured period are from the lower rung of the Indian society. The president of the Tamij Sangam also believed that mainly the lower caste like the Drummer came to Réunion Island during the indentured period. This can be inferred from their main deity, Madurai Veeran-the protector of villagers. Furthermore, the traditional stratification based on professional occupations was no longer practicable. Living in a social world where caste status no longer make sense, people originally from south India were primarily preoccupied with improving their immediate living conditions. The ideas of life improvement and upward mobility entailed a new way of being Indians. However, the disappearance of caste distinctions did not efface the hierarchy principle. PIOs in La Réunion have still been assessing each other on a hierarchical scale of values even if the individual and family's rank are much more achieved, in terms of education and wealth, than ascribed at birth. This hierarchy manifests itself only in the form of education and knowledge of French rather than caste/social status.

The integration of norms and values of the Indian culture is implicit in children's upbringing. The most pervasive pattern children acquire is that of separation of things: they soon separate themselves from their friends in the schools, they separate from the dominant French society, and they separate their Hindu religion at the temple from the Christian one. This early separation between the inside and the outside milieu, related to the purity/impurity conception, follows the person all the life. However this does not mean expressing hostile attitude towards to the dominant culture. Therefore, it is still believed that this concept of separation help them maintained the concept of multiple identity, by being French in the society and loyalty towards French institutions that does not prevent PIOs from being culturally Indian.

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81 Ibid.
5.8. Status of PIOs under DOM

Unlike Mauritius it must be realised that, in La Réunion, PIOs have to deal with the values of a culturally dominant western society, especially after the Island was directly administered through DOM. It is interesting to notice that the linguistic situation is different in another French Island that does not have the status of a “Department” but that of a “Territory” Tahiti. Here French is also the dominant and normative language but because of a completely different colonial history, it has not the same aura of prestige among the Polynesian population. Except for the growing population of so-called *demis*, literally half, who have a mixed origin, Tahitians still speak their vernacular language, that of their own ancestor before the arrival of the French. Not being able to speak French does not create a sense of inferiority unlike Réunion Island of today where Speaking French with metropole accent is considered a higher status in the society.

However in French Polynesian, it is a matter of pride, the pride to have remained “Polynesian” without being too much infected by the French culture. Indeed the local politicians, although they are *demis*, make it a point to address their elector in Maori. The use of Maori allows easy and discrete criticism of aliens. French metropolitans living in Tahiti are unaware of this criticism unless they make an effort to learn the language. On the other hand in La Réunion the case is reverse. This situation entails some contradictions within the society, the most important contradiction results from the unavoidable encounter between the traditional south Indian conceptions and the educational system of the dominant society. A good education leading to serious degrees improves the honour of the family. However, the degrees obtained at school and later at the university are associated with the system of values of the Western world that strongly challenge the ideas of dependence, self-sacrifice, family honor, fate etc. All the Indians traditional conceptions do not match the realities of French schools and some adaptations become necessary. Given ingrained disposition to separate things, PIOs generally manage these contradictions by developing a contextual consciousness. That contextual consciousness allows them to act selectively according to the norms of the social

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situation in which they are involved.\textsuperscript{84} Thus the question of being assimilated within the dominant society primarily depends on the colonial history. This was amply reflected from the colonial history Mauritius and Tahiti.

5.8.1. Status of PIO’s in Post 1980s

It was only since the last few years particularly after 1980’s that cultural upheaval was made possible by the leaders of Indian Temple and various cultural associations with the support of Mauritius. Most of important discipline of Christian attitude like steadfastness, devotion and memory verse recitation help the PIOs to replicate in Hinduism.

Though there are no Brahmin priests during the 1980’s, the priestly function was taken care of by PIOs who knew how to read and to interpret Tamil sacred books and have received a special knowledge through the oral tradition from their elders. These persons acted like the puja-ris 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 Island. Probably the main and most powerful figure of folk Hinduism in La Réunion is the goddess Kali and perhaps the most powerful temple associations in the Island are the Mahabhadra Kali Associations, who requires powerful self-sacrifices and animal offerings. Goddess Kali is associated with Madurai Viran, Muniswaran, and Mariyamma, three powerful deities to whom devotees took vows. The preliminary invocation of any ceremony if of course 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 has its own family cult (koledevom) addressed to a special deity. Among the specific expressions of this folk religion in the Island let us mention fire-walking, the ceremony of kavadee, the animal sacrifices and the priest's ritual of possession by a deity or an ancestor.

In Mauritius, the purpose of the British government was not to make the displaced and colonised populations integrating the British ways. As a result, when Mauritius became

independent in 1968, most of the traditional customs and habits of the people that have been under British rules until then were still alive. Today, a basically "Indian atmosphere" pervades the society. The population of Indian origin, numerically the most significant on the Island, usually called the "little India", manifests its identity through many signs of identity not so explicit in La Réunion, among which the daily use of the Hindi, Bhojpuri and Tamil language, the common wearing of Indian clothes, the selling of Indian food in the street, etc.

Thus unlike Mauritius, 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-baptism, marriage and funeral-as an unavoidable part of life. Even during the indentured period, the contract workers had to express Christian attitudes to be more accepted—if accepted at all—by their employers and by the society at large. This is still prevalent today. It appears that a Hindu sense of conformity, particularly the idea that each thing should be assigned its designated place 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, particularly "Mary" and "John," among people of Indian descent in the Island. 85

Although the engagement contract specified that the coolies' religion should be respected, the Catholic Church, directly linked to an authoritarian administration, spent a great deal of energy in converting the indentured workers. While the population of Mauritius, ruled under the British government, was allowed to maintain and express cultural and religious differences, in La Réunion, the motivation and policy to "civilize" the alien population under its control led the French administration to convert indentured workers to the official Christian religion and, through this, to make them adopt the French way of life. To put in Ghasarian words “From the very start of the immigration in this place, the practice of

Hinduism, as well as any notable expression of otherness like the maintenance of Tamil language and Indian dress, was overtly disapproved of and discouraged".  

5.9. Mauritius a Mirror for Réunion

The status of Indian identity in La Réunion and that of its sister Island Mauritius was particularly shaped by its colonial History. Mauritius acts as a mirror of reflection through which PIOs in La Réunion import and copied all the missing links it had lost under the French assimilation policy. In La Réunion, we have seen that from their very arrival on, these immigrants and their descendants had to adopt different style of clothing, religion and language, but it was not the case in Mauritius. Yet, these external impositions did not succeed in eradicating the main PIOs life particularly the south Indian patterns. Since the modern ideology favours the expression of particularities, specific identities in the Island are now becoming a matter of pride. By a strange irony of history, differences that Indians once feared to express too overtly are now more and more valued in the society and at present there are more than 30 (thirty) Indian association actively involved in promoting Indian cultural values in the Island, mention may be made of The Tamij Sangam and Ashrams and Temple based associations. On the educational front the Organisation for Diaspora Initiative (ODI) is actively involved in academic exchange and exposition of Indian cultural values.

The Hindu religion, disparaged from outside for a long time, is currently recognised and estimated as one of the riches of La Réunion. With no more feeling of guilt, Indian clothes, like saris, are progressively reintroduced among the Indians on the Island and are now proudly worn by the youth when going to the temple. Indians names for children, once forbidden, are presently allowed. The Tamil New Year is now officially a feast-day in La Réunion and PIOs working in governmental jobs may have a day off to celebrate the event. Since 1990, Deepavali, the festival of the lights, has been the object of a spectacular celebration by way of torch light procession in the main streets and Indian

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musical and dance exhibitions are then presented to the general population of the Island to showcase the rich cultural values. Thus, the PIOs retraced their roots by learning Sanskrit and Tamil with the initiatives of the Temple and Ashram.

5.9.1. Second Assimilation

A retrospective evaluation of the positioning of the status of PIOs in Mauritius and La Réunion reveals a unique system of intra-ethnic cohesion which I called second assimilation i.e. Assimilation not only by the alien host dominant community but also the within the dominant values and identities of the migrants group. Being in an alien country the caste and social mobility among the migrants groups was facilitated and therefore help positioned the less dominant group part of the dominant identity. This intra-ethnic cohesion has taken a similar line in both Mauritius and Réunion Island among the PIOs. In Réunion Island there are several archival statistics to prove that a lot of upper castes Hindus from Ranneganj, Chupprah etc were indentured to Réunion Island.

However, today they were completely assimilated in the Tamil fold, Tamil community being the dominant community in the Island they considered to be a Tamil is more and Indian expression. Whereas in Mauritius there is Bhojpuri or Hindi speaking dominant community with a sprinkling of Telegu, Tamil and Bengali community, here all PIOs identified themselves with the dominant Bhojpuri community, they believe that to be a Bhojpuri community is the first step of being Indian descent. For example a Hindi speaking woman from Mauritius who married a Telegu apparently proclaimed that she is proud of being Indian though her Husband belongs to a Telegu Community. This assimilation by the dominant caste in India is also prevalent in some isolated pocket primarily in rural areas. 89