Chapter: 7

Concluding Assessment

Retrospective analysis of the above chapters reveals that, La Réunion offers an interesting feature of cultural assimilation from France, conditioned by their political and economic dominant position. However in spite of this assimilation policy of France, PIOs still maintain most of its concepts and practices of their ancestors and still longs for their motherland and needs its support for cultural ties. The first sign of Indian cultural revival took its root from association like the Club Tamoul. Later on there are several Indian cultural and Temple association that actively promote Indian traditions and customs and today there are around hundreds Temple based associations and more than thirty cultural associations and three Ashrams blossoming in several cities in Reunion Island.

The French Nationality Law of June 26, 1889 affected Indian indentured workers in Réunion Island in two different ways: those whose parents were born in Réunion and those born in India. Under the law the former are French subject irrevocably from their birth and the latter are provisioned to citizenship provided they do not formally repudiate French nationality and claim the nationality of their parents within a year after attaining the age of 21. Around 48 PIOs have been granted French citizenship by this law till 1901. This was the first determinants of the transformation of Indian indentured identity.

On the assimilation front we noticed that, the first notable sign of assimilation on the PIOs pertains to the style of dressing. Saris became a thing of the past as they were given only blouse and skirts and men began to wear western trouser in place of dhoti. Wearing of rings on the nose and around the toes, chains and all the traditional values are now considered as taboos or thing of the past. This sense of cultural shame on the PIOs was more evident after the island came under the French Department in 1946.

Secondly, it was clearly evident from the contractual agreement signed where-in it was specifically mentioned that two free days in addition to the four holidays a year on the occasion of Pongal was granted. They were never allowed to practice their religion
openly. They were forcibly converted by the catholic priest and missionaries. However, towards the end of the 19th century they were allowed to construct a private temple on the courtyard of the dwelling hut. The papal authority was so influential that Church remained the main instrument to indoctrinate the PIOs in the Catholic domain. A child was usually taken to Church to be given baptism and a name, most notable among them being “Jean” and “Marie”. It was compulsory for them to go to church every Sunday.

Thirdly, it was acculturation on language. Since the introduction of the indentured workers in this Island, the language spoken became Creole for the common masses and French for the elite or the ruling class. However, after the introduction of DOM, most of the children began to learn French in schools and it became an effective tool of assimilation under the garb of social emancipation and with intent on linguistic nationalism. Education was impressed upon as means of freeing individual from the throes of drudgery by offering them government jobs.

The assertion of Indian Identity began in 1912, when PIOs in Réunion, hold the first non-violent demonstration in front of the British India Consulate submitting their memorandum of grievances against the white masters. As a result the Catholic Priest and the papal authorities were forced to restrict their control over the indentured workers and re-orient themselves which consequently brought better prospects in their (PIOs) life and other cultural activities. They explained to the priest, who on the pretext of noise pollution had banned religious and other cultural activities, the importance of their ritual practices.

The early 20th century saw an upheaval in the Economic life of the PIOs. They began to prosper in the field of trade and commerce. Some immigrants have had a significant impact on the economy of Réunion. One such Gujarati was Moussa Locate, who arrived in Réunion Island from Surat suburb with his eight sons. He set up a successful business in Saint-Paul. Today his descendants head a group of companies with important interests in the fields of medicine, consumer goods and appliances.
Similarly, Ismail Mamodjee Omarjee, arrived in Reunion in 1875 and set up a shop Rue des Bons Enfant at Saint-Pierre, where the huge family business is still headquartered. Remembered for his charitable work, including distribution food and drinks to families during Spanish flu epidemic of 1919. Another well-established Muslim business family is the Ravites. The founder’s son expanded the family business until the store became well known for its huge range of household goods.

The year 1946 saw the introduction of DOM in the Island, though was interpreted by various historians as a strategic move of France to check the United States activities in the Indian Ocean belt. However this can also be called a system for complete assimilation. This period also witnessed the greatest upheaval in the realm of socio-economic and political life of the PIOs. In the social realm the PIOs were completely assimilated in the French society. Economically they were as powerful as the French men since PIOs were allowed to participate in the country’s coveted civil services and trade and commerce and other government department jobs. Most of the politically active Indian absorbed themselves in the existing political party and went on to fight election to balance the skewed power structure.

In the realm of politics PIO’s in La Réunion were not left behind, Instituted under the third Republic, universal suffrage allows Reunionese to participate into local political and electoral battle. The year 1889 is marked by the acquisition of French nationality by Indians, though all the PIOs were granted citizenship in 1920. It was a very cumbersome process for Indians to become French citizens; numerous files were then deposited by this Indians to acquire the status of French in order to avail all civil and political rights. The participation of PIOs in local politics moves in a snail pace. They were mainly with the left leaning parties, as they claim to be the party that provides equal opportunity and protection of the interests of workers. Thus their (PIOs) choice ultimately fells with the Communist Party. The year 1912 was remarkable in a sense that the first PIO candidates appeared on the political scene at town hall of Sainte-Rose, out of the 21 advisers, Vally Lucien is elected 4th assistant.
Jean-Paul Virapoullé, began his political career as a General Councilor in 1969, subsequently elected Mayor of Saint-André in 1972. Louis Virapoullé his brother was elected senator in September, 1974. He is one of the first representatives of PIO’s to have a parliamentary mandate after Henry Piot. He is the first PIO’s from Réunion Island to received Pravasi Bharatya Samman Award. In March 1983 it was a historic win for Axel Kichenin (read Krishnan) in the municipal elections of Sainte-Marie as a Mayor. After his election three important holidays for the Indians and African and Muslim were passed. Presently the President of the Conseil General, Nasima Dindar, the mayor of Entre-Deux and Trio-Bassin Monsieur Roland Ramakistin are of Indian origin.

In some schools Tamil is taught as an optional language. Thus, PIO in Réunion are well established in all fields: business, agriculture, academics, politics and civil services.

The PIOs belonging to Muslim community are commonly known as Z’arabes. During the early 20th century, the Gujarati Muslim in La Réunion become economically strong, they have established a strong foothold in the economic life of the island in areas like transports, multiplication of agro and fabric business etc. They also undertook profession like barber, tailoring. The first case of selling goods and vegetable item door to door was also done by them. The Muslim are also strategically located closer to the coastal areas like, Trois-Bassin, Entre-Deux, Cilaos, Les hautes of Saint-Leu, and also in the hearts of Saint –Denis and Saint-Pierre.

Unlike the Tamils, the Muslim have no prefixed French name in La Réunion. They attributed this reason due to the fact that, they migrated to this island as a traders but not as an indentured workers. The PIO’s also made a significant contribution to the island foods, such as:

(a) Samosa, made of Chicken (unlike Indian aloo samosa)

(b) Biryani

(c) Dalpuri.
Though all the PIOs belonging to Tamil community were given a French name yet they often refer to their profession like pattair, Ecrivain, Producteur d’huile etc. The family profession served as a basic factor in identifying a person ethnic identity.

The Island's Indian cultural revivalism is presently grappling with the basic question like ‘can the thoroughly integrated, educated and prosperous French-speaking PIOs intent on asserting their Indian-ness?’ This self-searching primarily quest do not add up given the fact that PIOs do not stand out as a distinct group although they represent nearly one third of the Island's population. Moreover the Diaspora policy of the mother country is ironically biased for certain commonwealth countries. A lot of measures have been taken on the investment front while it is silent on the basic question of cultural linkages. This handicapped compounded with the French government proactive economic support of the PIOs serves as an imperatives and being contented within the French polity and society.

The search of cultural identity was enforced from the Temple and various cultural platforms at the local level. From 1960 onwards the younger Indians generation who went abroad to pursue higher studies began to realised who they are? Then this period of cultural consciousness among the PIO’s coincided the policy of decentralisation during the left dispensation under François Mitterrand who took office in May 1981. The law of decentralisation, which was passed on 31st December 1982, gave Réunion Island a collective territorial status, whereby an amount of decision-making powers was entrusted to locally elected people. This decentralisation helped to bring about changes in certain aspects of political, economic and social life like:

(a) Independent radio stations.

(b) Commemoration of the 1848 abolition of slavery.

(c) Creation of the Réunion academy and University, etc.

This policy also encouraged the development of Tamil, Chinese, Comoran, Madagascars and Breton societies, who all proclaimed their right to a distinct identity and a return to their roots.
The major contact with India began with the establishment of Indian Consulate in St. Denis and was gradually speed up in the post 1990. This was an impetus to the Indian association for the cultural revival movement. In the early days, Mauritius was a microcosm of Indian cultural heritage in that it acted as a cistern/mirror from where brides, temple architect and various Indian-connect were absorbed into. Presently, there are quite a convincing number of India-trained priests in the island. With the introduction of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas in 2003 by the Government of India (GOI), exchanges between the two countries have intensified but the schemes and incentives like PIO/OCI Cards have not gotten translated as they remained entangled in legal-diplomatic inconsistency between French Department and GOI. Through these various initiatives the educated younger generation began visiting “their ancestral villages to rediscover some traditional Indians cultural values and there are many aspirants who could not trace their roots due to lack of cooperation from the government of India.

The People of Indian Origin (PIOs) constitute a little over 31 percent of the 802,000 strong population of the island. But only some 10-12 persons possess PIO’s Card. The major reason for this discrepancy being that Indian Government’s policy requires a person to show a documentary proof of his forefather till the fourth generation. The onus of producing a proof become all the more onerous given the fact that here in French Department, and unlike the British colonies, all the archives were burnt down and the only visible mark of identifying PIOs are their patronyms. Moreover, PIOs in Réunion left Indian as a British India Citizen. Though there are major initiatives taken by GoI with regards to its Diaspora policy and a full fledge Ministry yet the policy towards the Francophone is lacking if not missing. This led the PIOs from Francophone zone to term India’s Diasporas policy as British Colonial hangover, primarily catering to the need of the Anglophone/commonwealth countries. Though Réunion Island has vast potential areas of trade and commerce with India, It is still very limited. The main obstacles are an absence of direct shipping and air-links between India and Réunion Island, the language barrier and absence of contacts and information between the entrepreneurs of India and Réunion Island.
A close scrutiny of India’s Diaspora policy primarily focus on the diasporas investments for its economic growth while the social and cultural aspirations of building linkages with the PIO’s fail to attract the attention of the GOI. The politics of rhetoric should be replaced by a conscious effort on the part of the Indian government towards empowering the Indian Diasporas.

Thus, it is imperatives for the GOI, to established Apravasi Ghat on the line of the French cultural institution, Alliance Français should be instituted. Alternatively, a sub centre of Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA) to promote Indian cultural values which continue to hold pride of place within that community should be established. This was also recommended by the HLC Vide Para no. 28.36 which says “There is a vast divergence in the needs of the different segments of the diaspora in the field of culture. We must therefore adopt a balanced and coordinated approach in responding to those needs. After its careful examination of the successful cultural centres in other countries, the committee recommends the adoption of British Council model for the larger demographic centres and where there are Missions of considerable size. The Alliance Francaise model should be used for centres concentrating on the dissemination of Indian languages and which are not located in the capital cities of the world”. In doing so Indian cultural moorings can be re-invok to the benefit of Indians abroad and significantly a new balance can be achieved with the host nation. They can hence be brought into the symbolism of Mother India’s forgotten children. In order to speed up the people to people a direct air connection From St.Denis to Chennai/New Delhi should be commissioned immediately.

In the sphere of Cultural promotion, the ICCR should also deepened linkages with diaspora; the scope and activities of Cultural centres in countries with substantial Indian presence should be expanded; the large number of institutions, other institutions like Bharatiya Vidyab Bhavan, the Rama Krishna Mission, the Chinmaya Mission, and institutions of performing arts run by PIOs/NRIs should be provided assistance in the form of advanced training, and in procuring teaching aids, music and costume which ICCR should facilitate a mechanism; successful model for cultural interaction such the
British Council and *Alliance Française* models should be appropriately adapted and emulated; the Birthright Israel programmed should be emulated; interaction with French speaking Indian diasporas should be intensified.

In the realm of education, the Indian government can initiate various constructive capacity-building programmes aimed to develop the human resources among ethnic Indian Diasporas. This will help in tapping the scientific talents of the PIO's. The proposed PIO University in India should be set up on an urgent basis which could offer technical education to deserving Francophone PIOs. The announcement made during the 6th PBD meetings for the creation of a corpus fund out of the contributions from the wealthy PIO's to manage the administrative expenses of the proposed PIO University is not only timely but a welcome step. The bottleneck of cooperation between the bureaucrats and the PIOs should be ironed out before implementing these schemes. Despite several rule in force there are a number of PIO's being exploited by the bureaucratic hurdles and middlemen nexus.