CHAPTER VI

GANDHIJI'S SPIRITUAL INFLUENCE IN MAURITIUS

Every year thousands of Mauritians celebrate Swaraj Diwas at Lalmatie, a village in East Mauritius and Gandhi Jayanti in Laventure, another village.

- Basdeo Bissoondoyal

The above reflection of Professor Basdeo Bissoondoyal, a Mauritian scholar of note, aged 75, who is presently living in Port Louis, the Capital of Mauritius island, has a very deep significance for Mauritius in general in that it speaks volumes. Who would believe in the outside world that such events such as Swaraj Diwas and Gandhi Jayanti celebrations do occur in a remote island lost in the Indian ocean?

After having had several contacts over the years with the Professor, who has been my Guru in the field of Religion and Culture as well as in Hindi and Sanskrit, I can say without the shadow of any doubt that it was thanks to his ceaseless effort and his missionary zeal that Gandhiji's spirituality has had a meaningful impact in Mauritius.

The present chapter deals with Gandhiji's visit to Mauritius at the turn of this century and his emphasis on education in Mauritius. It also discusses how Gandhism actually came to the country in the 1940's and did influence the life-style of the Mauritian nationale in general and the Indo-Mauritians in particular.
His visit to Mauritius

Everybody knows that Gandhiji stayed twenty-one years in South Africa and served the overseas Indians first before serving his own fellow countrymen in India. But very few people know that he visited Mauritius, a tiny island on the East coast of Africa, where he spent twenty-one days and acquainted himself fairly well with the conditions of the settlers who mainly migrated from India in the year 1835.

It is interesting to note that several Mauritian papers referred to Gandhiji’s arrival in Mauritius at the turn of this century. A Mauritian paper, The Standard of 31st October 1901, reported the following in French by stating that Gandhiji came on board Nowshera on 30th October 1901:

A bord du Nowshera arrivé de Natal se trouve le grand avocat indien Gandy(sic), qui se rend de Natal à Bombay. Comme il doit séjourner à Maurice, les Indiens se proposent de le fêter.¹

Another Mauritian paper, Le Journal de Maurice of 15th November 1901, did not fail to report that Gandhi was given a grand banquet on 14th November 1901. The report, which was equally in French, had this to say:

M.K. Gandhi, l’avocat indien de passage à Maurice, a été fêté, hier soir, par la communauté arabe, Grand banquet présidé par Goolam Mamode Ajam fils.²

In a very interesting book entitled Mahatma: A new approach, Professor Besdeo Bissoondoyal clearly stated that Gandhiji reached the shores of Mauritius on 30th October 1901 and left on 19th November 1901, while he was on his way to India, travelling on board the ship S.S. Nowshera.³
This statement supports what the Mauritian papers wrote at the beginning of this century. Mauritius to-day is proud of the historical visit of the Mahatma, who was then still a young barrister, aged 32. Another Mauritian of note, Dr Kissoonsingh Hazareesingh, who is presently the Director of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, did also mention in his book entitled *Histoire des Indiens à l'île Maurice*, that Gandhiji spent three weeks in Mauritius island.4

There is another solid proof that Gandhiji did really visited Mauritius Island. While perusing the Autobiography of the Mahatma, many readers would be inclined to think that he merely spoke of his experiments in South Africa, without having anything to do with the tiny island. In fact, it was Gandhiji himself who declared:

So I sailed for home. Mauritius was one of the ports of call, and as the boat made a halt there, I went ashore and acquainted myself fairly well with the local conditions. For one night I was the guest of Sir Charles Bruce, the Governor of the colony.5

His emphasis on education in Mauritius

Whenever Gandhiji had an opportunity to air his opinion, he never failed in his duty to urge the Indian settlers in Mauritius to keep their prestige and stick to their culture by sending their children to school. During a reception given to him at a place called Taher Bagh, located in Port Louis, the capital of the island, he forecast that the prosperity of the nation at large would depend on the labour of the Indian immigrants who must educate their children. A Mauritian author, Deolall Thacoor, who
wrote a book entitled *Mahatma Gandhi in Mauritius*, could not refrain from referring to the speech of Gandhiji by saying that

Gandhiji's words came out of his heart and fell as nectar on the famished ears of his audience. He advised them to give more attention to the education of their children, to consider themselves as citizens of their adopted land and encouraged them to take an active part in the government of the country.6

The speech made by Gandhiji was actually a landmark in the history of the island. Mention of this historical and meaningful event is made in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, where is is clearly stated:

Mr Gandhi thanked the guests at the gathering and especially the host. He said that the sugar industry of the island owed its unprecedented prosperity mainly to Indian immigrants. He stressed that Indians should regard it their duty to acquaint themselves with happenings in their motherland, and should take interest in politics. He also laid much emphasis on the urgent need to pay attention to the education of their children.7

Undoubtedly, Gandhiji, as an inspirer and a guide, was not prepared to allow the Indians in Mauritius to settle down in a foreign country without their taking any interest in the education of their children and in the affairs of their country. He empathized with them so much that when he went to India, he did not fail to defend them as if he was one of their close associates. At the 17th session of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta, he himself declared:
Gentlemen, I appear before you not as a delegate, but more as a petitioner on behalf of the hundred thousand British Indians in South Africa, and probably also of the future emigrants... The traders have gone in their thousands to different parts of the world, to South Africa, Zanzibar, Mauritius, Fiji, Singapore... Gentlemen, if some of the distinguished Indians I see before me to-night were to go to South Africa, inspired with that noble spirit, our grievances must be removed.

To-day, it can be said that Gandhiji gave his blessings to the Indian immigrants. Indians in Mauritius now occupy high positions as Vice-chancellor of University of Mauritius, Prime-Minister, Ministers, Doctors, Lecturers and Engineers, besides being also craftsmen, technicians and labourers. There are also very many journalists and writers among them. In one of his speeches, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Mauritius, our present Prime Minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, could not help saying:

It is a historical fact that the foundations of Gandhiji's work were laid in Africa when he took up the cause not only of overseas Indians but of all who suffered the indignities of oppression and servitude. The time has come to make a complete break-through in the traditional system of education in Mauritius...... It will be the special task of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute to pioneer the work of discovery or re-discovery of a new world in keeping with the ideals and traditions we have inherited from the past. In this respect we are determined to ensure that the cultural heritage of the people of Mauritius should not be lost or neglected.

The people of Mauritius have sincerely kept the tradition and culture of the past. Gandhiji's visit to the island and his wish to see the Indian immigrants flourish have not been something simply to be mentioned in history.
books. Actually the Indian immigrants celebrate Gandhiji not only on his 
Jayanti day or on his Balidan Divas or on Republic day or on Swaraj Diwas but 
also on the Agaman day, that is, the day he came out from India to Mauritius. 
If Gandhiji came in his physical form at the turn of this century, it should 
not be forgotten that Gandhism too later came to stay in the country and 
influenced its people.

**Gandhism in Mauritius**

Mauritians were very fortunate in that they did not have to depend on 
foreigners to bring the spirituality of Gandhiji in the education of the 
masses. It was Professor Basdeo Bissoondoyal, a strict mauritian discipli­
narian, reformer, scholar, vegetarian and teetotaler in his life-style, 
who, in the year 1940, actually brought Gandhism in Mauritius, by precept 
and example, on his return from higher studies in India. Deolall Thacoor 
was right when he wrote:

The people of Mauritius should 
be grateful to Professor B. Bissoondoyal, 
M.A., who with patience, diligently 
unearthed the hidden historical treasure 
which lay covered under thick layers of 
dust of ignorance and lost in the dark 
abyss of Time.10

When Gandhiji launched his liberation movement in India, many 
intellectuals in Mauritius were afraid to mention his name but the fearless 
Professor referred to his work and started to educate the masses on Gandhian 
lines. He knew the consequences of his decision to stick to Gandhism in 
action. Although he was jailed four times, he did not stop his mission of 
awakening the masses by delivering inspiring speeches everywhere and publi­
shing educational books and pamphlets. He toured the country and spread
the message of Truth, Love and Non-violence. In 1943, he organized a
great *vaïna* in Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius, where 60,000 people
assembled. That place was given the name of *Gandhi Maidan* and it was there
that the Professor, inspired by Gandhiji's spirituality, encouraged the
Indo-mauritians to educate themselves by following Gandhism in action.

There was a significant awareness followed by an important awakening
in the people. Gandhism was indeed in action. Even the Hindi daily
*Hindustan* of Delhi did not fail to recall, in its issue of 12th March 1968,
when writing about the independence of Mauritius which emerged from the
grip of colonialism on that very date, that the year 1943 and other years
were unforgettable as they saw the country striving hard to shake off its
century-old slumber. In fact the 1940's were memorable years, as, during
those years, Gandhi's name was on the lips of everybody and in 1947, a few
months before Gandhiji was assassinated, the Mauritians celebrated the Gandhi
week. Professor Bissoondoyal reported the following in a very forceful way:

> The culmination was reached when
> in October, 1947, Mauritians celebrated
> with éclat the Gandhi week in LaVenture
> and Saint Pierre. Gandhism became a
> living force.

The meaningful impact

No one can deny that every since 1947 and still more, after 1948,
Gandhiji's photo was hanging on the walls of every house and every shop
of each and every Indo-mauritian. His spirituality was both felt and
accepted. Again Professor Basdeo Bissoondoyal rightly observed that
'Gandhians in Mauritius take to the dhoti and Kurta'. Indeed, the
people of Mauritius started to be national-minded as well as religious-
minded.
In the year 1968, the Gandhi centenary was celebrated with great enthusiasm. A magazine by the name of The Amaranth issued a special number to which the researcher was associated. The Government of Mauritius issued commemorative stamps, various articles on Gandhiji's appeared in almost all the Mauritian papers. A booklet entitled Gandhi Smriti was published by the Hindi Writers' Association. This last publication carried many important views from various writers, and, inter alia, there was a beautiful poem on the arrival of Gandhiji in Mauritius, in which it was stated that Gandhiji's historical speech in 1901 saved the Indian settlers from the danger of forgetting their culture.

The impact of Gandhism was so meaningful that Gandhi schools, Gandhi old People's Home, Gandhi Halls and Gandhi Bhavans started to open their doors. The following was clearly reported:

Ever since the 5th of October 1947
Mauritians have been busy opening Gandhi schools. A Khadi Vidyalaya is in existence. In North Mauritius the Gandhi Old People's Home has a hundred inmates. There are by now so many Gandhi halls that in the near future every public hall owned by the Indo-Mauritian sector, will be a Gandhi Bhavan.

People started revering Gandhiji as a Saint to the extent that a statue was erected at Palma Road Temple in the town of Quatre Bornes. Furthermore, the book entitled Gandhi Charita Manas was given the same importance as Rama Charita Manas. The present Mahatma Gandhi Institute made it a rule in the assembly for the students to recite the following prayer which was so dear to Gandhiji:
Grant me, 0 master, by thy grace
To follow all the good and pure,
To be content with simple things;
To consider my fellows not as means but ends,
To serve them stalwartly, in thought, word, deed;
Never to utter word of hatred or of shame;
To cast away all selfishness and pride;
To speak no ill of others;
To have a mind at peace,
Set free from care; and led astray from thee
Neither by happiness nor woe.
Set thou my feet upon this path,
And keep me steadfast in it,
Thus only shall I please thee, serve thee right. 17

It is interesting to note that every year Mauritians in general are considering it their sacred duty to celebrate Bharitya Swaraj Divas and Gandhi Jayanti in memory of Gandhiji. For them Gandhiji has been their Bapu first because, in fact he served overseas Indians before he served his own fellow-countrymen in India. They can never forget that it was he who urged them to educate their children and to take active part in the affairs of their country. In the school Curriculum for Cambridge School Certificate, Hinduism is one of the subjects offered by the students who have to study also the life and message of Mahatma Gandhi, besides other noble lives of sages and seers.

It is equally interesting to note that not only Indo-Mauritians revere Gandhiji in Mauritius but also members of other ethnic groups as well. France Boyer, a sincere Christian, once wrote in La Vie Catholique:

If Gandhi had met Christ
the latter would have loved him. 18

The last statement is indicative of the impact of Gandhiji's spiritual influence even on the Christian community of the island. To-day, Gandhiji's name is actually a living spiritual force in the Mauritian nation, and his Jayanti celebration is a regular item in the calendar.
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