



## SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF INDIAN DIASPORA IN SHAPING MAURITIUS AS CHHOTA BHARAT

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### Abstract

*Mauritius is a multicultural, multilingual, and multi-ethnic country, based on a mixture of different types of population. In the present condition, people of Indian origin predominantly reside there. As per the World Factbook 2020, the population of Mauritius is 1379365, scattered in many ethnic groups like Indo-Mauritian, Creole, Sino-Mauritian, and Franco-Mauritian. Indian indentured labourers (migrants) carried their socio-cultural values and traditions in Mauritius. Indians from various regions use languages in Mauritius, such as Bhojpuri, Hindi, Gujarati, Kutchi, Mandarin, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu in connection to their ethnicity and religion. Thus, the mainstream still collaborates their historical and cultural identity with their language. Hence, the history of Mauritius is mainly affected by the Indian indentured labourers in several ways.*

*During the indentured migration, the Indians carried their Indian identity with them. However, as per Indian Hindu tradition, the person who crosses the sea will lose their identity. Nevertheless, indentured labourers started to preserve their Indian identity. During the indentured period, people having different culture and social status were living together in one village and working together in sugar cane fields. Therefore, it can be said that there were no cultural or social boundaries the existed among them. At present, Indian culture is the dominant culture in Mauritius. There are the majority of Indian origin people, that's why Indian people called to Mauritius as "Chhota Bharat".*

*This paper discusses the importance of Indian culture in Mauritius. Indian people migrated to Mauritius during the colonial period. How did they preserve Indian culture there? What was the situation of Indian languages in Mauritius? It also discusses the Indian food and festivals in Mauritius. Many Indian festivals are celebrated in Mauritius.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Diaspora, Mauritius, Language, Ethnicity.

### Introduction:

Indians are migrated everywhere in the world. They have a unique identity. Wherever they live, they preserve their own identity. They continuously practised Indian culture. When Indians migrated to other countries, they carried their culture and traditions and practised. Indians migrated in large scale during the colonial rule under the Indentureship. During the Indenture period, the Indians migrated to Mauritius to work in the sugar cane plantations.

Mauritius became a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-ethnic country, based on a mixture of different types of population. In the present condition, the demography of Mauritius belongs to Indian origin predominantly residing there. People of Indian origin are in the majority in Mauritius. They have built their society as it is Indian society. The Indian languages have a good position in Mauritius. The Indian government also gives some support to promote the Indian languages and culture in Mauritius.

### Mauritius:

The island of Mauritius lies in the Indian Ocean almost 800 km in the east of Madagascar. During the mercantilism, Europeans searched trade routes and places for the market. The location of Mauritius island is important because it is located in the Indian Ocean on the way of traders. This location on the trade route that South Asia to Europe. During the sixteenth century Portuguese navigator, Don Pedro Mascaregnas had discovered this island. The Portuguese named it *Ilha da Cirnos*, or Swan Island (Kuczynski, 1949; Mishra, 2009). Afterwards, the Dutch occupied the island, they destroyed *Dodo* and controlled the island till 1710. The French Captured this island in 1715, after five years, French acquired the control and renamed it *Ile de France* (Turner,

2016). As well as they controlled the island almost for a hundred years. They ruled till the end of their rule in 1810. In this year, the British had taken possession of Mauritius and ruled until independence. Mauritius became independent in 1968 with decolonization. Afterwards, it accepted membership of the New Commonwealth. Since March 1992, it is a Republic Country within the New Commonwealth.

This steamy island is a microcosm of arranging qualities. It is being controlled by more than a million individuals, who are significantly heterogeneous with respect to the ethnic social affair and religious adherence. This difference has as one attached to the island's explorer history (Hills, 1999). The identity of Mauritius in the world is a multi-ethnic country. As per world Factbook 2017, the population of Mauritius is 1,356,388.

It is believed that during the 10<sup>th</sup> century the Arabian traders had visited Mauritius for trade purposes, but there is no evidence regarding it. Arabs named it *Dina Arobi*. The word *Dina* is derived from the Sanskrit *Dwipa* (Island), and *Arobi* from *Rupyam* (Rupée) (Bissoondoyal, 1963). However, at island did not have a permanent settlement till the sixteenth century. The Portuguese had set up the first permanent settlement after occupation (Benedict 1961; Bowman, 2018). A Portuguese settlement marks the beginning of the Mauritius history. This settlement also becomes an important aspect of Mauritius history. The location of the island on the trade route, that was important for Europeans. Therefore, the Europeans fought with each other to control the island. For example, from the settlement of the Portuguese in 1505 to 1810 the island went from one hand to another like from Portuguese to Dutch to French and then British. The British had control over the island for a long time rather than Portuguese and French. Today's Mauritius is designed by the European colonies, but the name of the island is formed by the Dutch in honour of the "Maurits van Nassau" (Hazareesingh, 1977; Oonk, 2007; Morgan, 2009). The Dutch settled in Mauritius after capturing it from the Portuguese. The arrival of the Portuguese marked the beginning of an important era, it led to the European growth and the development of the commercial trade route to Asia. The European coloniser designed Mauritius history through the competition to occupy the island and control trade routes.

During the seventeenth century, the Dutch occupied the island, but they did not start a settlement before 1630. There is evidence of slaves brought from Madagascar to Mauritius by the Dutch in 1641. Gradually, Europeans brought people from various areas of the world, mainly from their colonies. During the period of the Dutch settlement, there was a lack of labourers for the development of agricultural land which for the cultivation of rice, indigo, tobacco, and sugarcane. As well as gaining raw materials for industrialisation. Therefore, the basic need for more labourers was fulfilled by import slaves from other colonies. At that time, the slaves were opposed to the slavery system. According to Hills (1999), this led to the disappointment of the slaves somehow. Further, he mentions that the Dutch 'lacked zeal', or experienced twisters or absence of food, yet quite that regardless of the burden of ever more crimson types of torment and demise, slaves kept on rebelling, blaze houses and government structures and escape into the forests. The agricultural progress of the island stopped by natural disasters like mice, storms, monkeys, and droughts. As well as the revolts of slaves against the Dutch. That's why the Dutch colonisers decided to leave the island. Finally, they abandon the island in 1710 (Hazareesingh, 1977).

At that time, the Dutch left the island there were only a few slaves who escaped into the forests. For the five years, Mauritius was not under any colonise. In 1715, the French colonisers arrived in this island (Mookherji, 1962; Prasad, 2000). After the settlement of French, they changed the name of Mauritius to *Ile de France*. Furthermore, in the same way, an unlimited increment of slaves was imported from outside. The military powers were used to keep slaves silent and under control. At the same time, some of the governors established the framework of the future of Mauritius. While making the framework the authorities ignored the anguish and crises of the workers. They could not provide wellbeing and basic needs of the slaves. In the middle 1800s, there was a huge growth in the population from 1,000 to 73,000. Hence, most of the population growth of slaves was increased up to 80 per cent (Hills, 1999).

Primarily, the geographical location of Mauritius has been very beneficial for the colonisers. Therefore, it became an attraction for the Europeans, and they started utilizing it for the trading port as well as for obtaining raw materials as possible as. There was a competition among the Europeans as everyone wanted to do more business and get more benefit. For example, in 1810, the British arrived in Mauritius with the navy of 70 ships, 10,000 groups, and force ("History Mauritian Archaeology", 2018). That is why the French were defeated and compelled to leave *Ile de France*. At the same time, the Napoleonic Wars also was going on. In this war, the British had overthrown French. According to the amendment of Paris, French surrendered and Mauritius gave to the British. The British continued restoring the island's original name 'Mauritius' that was given by the Dutch. It was quite simple takeovers partially because Britain had first colonial power virtually control the Indian Ocean. From that time the rule of British started. Even then they permitted to the settled population of French for the live-in the island. According to Hills (1999), the confirmation that French pilgrims (Franco- Mauritians) would be allowed to

preserve their traditions, language, religions, and property. Because of the generosity of the British, today the French people are living a life of luxury.

The limited British interest in Mauritius itself proved that they only acquired the control of the island's government and never attempted entirely to control Mauritius or remove all French people. When the handing over of Mauritius from French to British was noticeable by its peacefulness and the surrender agreement itself provided substantial terms.

In 1833, the slavery abolition act passed by the House of Commons. According to this Act, 66,000 slaves became free in Mauritius. Progressive slaves were generally unwilling to stay and work there. Because they did not have residents as well as they treated badly by landowners. Thus, an intense lack of labourers. Nevertheless, as the sugar business was extending. It was essential for the cultivators to locate another wellspring of shabby workers. When African slaves became free, so they refused to work in sugarcane plantations (Hazareesingh, 1966). They swung to another area of the English Empire. Thus, started a flood of indentured labourers both Hindu and Muslim from Bihar and other deprived areas of India to Mauritius.

Somewhere, around 1834 to 1910, a number of 450,000 Indian indentured labourers arrived Mauritius. However, roughly 33% of Indentured labourers came back to India after the end of the contract. Around 67% of Indian indentured people choose to be settled there permanently. This was an arrangement of work just about as dense as slavery. Yet there were significant contrasts, which permitted the Indians to safeguard their way of life. For instance, indentured labourers were allowed to worship their religious idols; commending celebrations and speak their language (Hills, 1999).

### **Indian Diaspora:**

The definition of the Indian diaspora serves to the Indian origin people who are living in abroad and preserve to the Indian ethnocultural influences. In the earlier phase of migration, Indians had exchanged values and maintained religious contacts with different social patterns like the Greek and the Mesopotamian. Additionally, there are different cases that cast light on the migration of the Buddhist monks towards the goal of the spread the religion and its teachings. The Indians migrated before several years, driven by different reasons: slavery, indentured labour, and guest labour programmes and so on. Indian diaspora is the representation of India in other countries through its kinship, religion, values, and remarkable diversity of cultures. Overseas Indians have been living in many countries and speaks different languages. They are engaged in various businesses. Even Though they have differences, but they share their social heritage and deep respect for India. Early Indian migration was easy that was not happening with forcefully thrashing. Hence, the Indian culture and civilisation extremely influenced those regions where Indians settled.

This study explains the situation of indentured labourers and the reason behind the migration from India to Mauritius. Questions were raised about what was the factors that supported the system and why Indians were involved in the indentured system? The history of indentured labourers helpful to understand the current situation of Indian origin people in Mauritius.

India has a very long history of migration. During the ancient period, Indian people migrated to other countries as purpose spread of the religions as well as trade. Pre-colonial Indian history there have chronically evidence of the continuous relationship between the kingdoms of the Coromandel Coast and the islands of South-East Asia. In Southeast Asia and particularly in Thailand and Bali. There are several elements of the Buddhist and Hindu religion. As well as from that time yet myths and culture have survived peacefully (Jayaram & Atal, 2004).

Officially, Slavery was firstly abolished in the English colonies by the British government in 1834. After that, it abolished in French (1846), and Dutch colonies (1873). The effect of the abolition of slavery that sensed the compelling lack of human labour. The lack of labourers in agricultural plantations affects the economy. A significant number of Indians were included as indentured labour and transported to different colonies (Wolpert, 2005). Due to this, the European colonial plantation economy faced a labour crisis. In that period, the sugar plantation and the plantation economies collapsed. The continuous demand for labour resulted in the process of migration. It increases where thousands of Indians were involved parallel with other colonies like Southeast Asia, China, and Africa.

India is one of the biggest contributing nations in the overall migration. India contributes the largest diaspora in the world. Around 30 million Indians are living outside of the country (Statistics of Indian population in abroad, n.d.). The larger parts of them are the indentured labourers who had migrated before Independence. They are

known as the Person of Indian Origin (PIO). Since independence, India has added to worldwide migration in the form of skilled, semiskilled, and the unskilled labourer in various parts of the world.

During the period of Sir Robert Farquhar, who was the first British Governor of Mauritius. He helped to the 895 Indian convicts for constructing main roads in Mauritius. Some of the Indian prisoners had worked in the post office department (Bissoondoyal, 1963). From 1834 to 1920, Indians were migrated to different parts of the world as indentured labour. During the colonial rule, Indians were exported to the other British colonies. It cleared the way for the indentured system. At the same time, the indentured system was developed as a new form of slavery. Nevertheless, in fact, in India, crossing the oceans were blasphemy according to the consecrated Hindu sacred texts. Regardless of this confinement, mass migration brought about almost twenty million people to have settled in seventy nations. The colonisation of India opened the pathways for new migration opportunities and Indians were benefited themselves (Bhat, 2003). After the Mutiny of 1857, some of the Indians sent to Mauritius as the prisoners (Bissoondoyal, 1963).

Under the British rule, a large number of Indians migrated as an indentured labourer in the British colonies. The British government declared the abolition of slavery in the colonies. Due to this declaration, many colonies faced a huge labour shortage. The Indentureship was introduced as one kind of experiment in Mauritius, which was very successful and applied later to other colonies. Indians were highly involved in Indentureship and migrated to Mauritius. The historical study provides information about the indentured labourers and their condition (Ibid).

Hereby this study mainly focused on the history of the Indian indentured labour. As well as tried to understand the condition of Indian indentured labourers who were migrated to Mauritius. In foreign countries, Indians tried to preserve their culture, social practices, and religious beliefs etc. Indian migrants preserved their religious identities such as Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity and they follow their own culture, faith, beliefs, languages, and all the traditional practices. Together, they created a mixture of the cultural identity of Mauritius in the world.

### **Glimpses of Indian Culture in Modern Mauritius:**

During the migration period, Indian people migrated to Mauritius with their culture, traditions, religions, languages, beliefs, and castes. They carried the Indian culture with them, as well as food habits, rituals, and tradition. At present, they are practising their ancestral culture. Indians came from various part of India to Mauritius, with their different traditions and religions but they have faced the same kind of problems and experiences in Mauritius. Indo-Mauritian people are currently following the same Indian culture (Parekh, Singh & Vertovec, 2003). Due to indentured labour migration, Mauritius became a multicultural, multilingual, and multi-ethnic country.

Most of the migrants came to Mauritius from Bombay, Bihar, Madras and the North-Western Provinces of India. They are worshipping to many gods and goddesses such as Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva and other puranic ceremonies (Hazareesingh, 1966). During the indentured period, people having different culture and social status were living together in one village and working together in sugar cane fields. Therefore, it can be said that there were no cultural or social boundaries that existed among them. At the present time, Indian culture is the dominant culture in Mauritius. There is the marriage pattern of Indian origin people, which is partially like India. Generally, the “arrange” marriages happened within similar groups and classes (Hazareesingh, 1966). In the present time, Hindu women use *Tika* on the foreheads in Mauritius and the married women of towns put the Vermilion into a partition of their hair (Eriksen, 1992).

In the present scenario, Mauritius has the largest population of Indian origin, which follows Indian cultural values. The Indo-Mauritian people follow Indian culture as well as they are following the Mauritian lifestyle also. People of Indian origin partially assimilate to other ethnic groups such as Africans, Chinese, and French. Moreover, they try to adopt their cultural values. As Eriksen (1992) stated that, “this is not to say that there has been little or no cultural change since the bulk of the indentured labourers arrived four or more generations ago”.

Indian society is mainly based on the *Varna* system. During the migration period, the Indians carried to *Varna* and Caste system with them. During the recruitment time, contracts written by the British clerks. They were not familiar with Indian names and caste names. Recruiters wrote the name of castes unclear like Indoo, Maratha, Telinga, Telgu, Malabar, Muslim, Gentoo. Therefore, they often represented the regional identity more than the caste. Among Indians, many castes and sub-castes existed. It is very difficult to trace the caste linkages of migrants. Marina Carter has listed the name of castes and sub-castes more than 70 only from North India in Mauritius (Mishra, 2006). Thus, the caste prejudices become a loss for the Indians after migration as an indentured labourer.

Most of the migrants belonged to the middle and lower caste groups. Because of the Indian social structure, treated to the lower caste people as untouchables (slaves). They did not have the right to education and property. In Indian society, the caste system played a very important role that was the reason behind the migration. Thus, lower caste people started to search for another way to escape this tyrannical situation. During the journey, indentured labour cannot preserve their purity of touch and diet. According to Hindu religion, crossing the sea was prohibited. Thus, the notion of purity becomes somewhat fluid. The caste and untouchability became submissive because of the migration. A maximum number of the indentured labourers belong to the middle and lower castes. In Mauritius, they preserve their caste identity, but it is not similar to India. Through the Indentureship, maintenance of caste system was very difficult. Indian people could not maintain their caste differences and hierarchy.

At the present time, the Constitution of Mauritius mentioned that there is no discrimination among the people based on race, sex, caste, place of origin, political opinions, colour, or creed. In the second chapter under the section 16 'Protection from Discrimination' in article 3 (The Constitution of the Republic of Mauritius, 2016: 15).

However, in Mauritius, the politicians utilised the caste system for political benefit. The politicians tried to continue the caste system for political purpose. According to them, it should be continued for political benefits. There are few different organisations such as 'Vaish Mukti Sangh', the 'Gahlot Rajput Maha Sabha', the 'Arya Ravi Ved Pracharani Sabha' working to preserve their own cultural identity. According to Hollup (1996), "these caste populations have emerged as important interest groups bargaining for their share of state resources (particularly government jobs) which are distributed through political patronage" (cited in Niksniketa, 2013). Now in Mauritius, politicians very well know how to divide people based on caste and get benefit in the election. The Indians migrated to Mauritius carried their caste and in the present scenario, the people of Indian origin are still following the caste identity. As well as the caste identity is replaced by the ethnic identity in Mauritius.

Prasad (2000) discusses the relationship between India and Mauritius. India and Mauritius are the two different countries, but ethnically similar. They found a non-alignment with the called third world. They accept the same ideology for international commitments. They have striking similarities in their heterogenous, ethnic, social, cultural, and physical characteristics. Indian origin people are in majority that's why they controlled power in Mauritius. So, it's called "Little India". Mauritians have an emotional attachment with India. Both the countries are multi-racial, multi-lingual, and Hindi speaking people constituting the bulk of the population. They have been celebrated festivals such as *Ramanavami*, *Holi*, *Dussehra*, *Diwali*, *Idul Fitr*, *Tazia* with great enthusiasm and joyful (Hazareesingh, 1966). India supported to the independence movement of Mauritius. Because of the majority of Indian origin people in Mauritius.

### **Mauritius as Chhota Bharat:**

Mauritius is a multi-cultural country and multi-religious society living together in peace. Different national communities share their culture and values such as Indian, African, European, and Chinese. Mauritian people participate and celebrated different festivals and make good relations with other people. It is a unique feature of Indo-Mauritius culture. In Mauritius, different Indian communities are living together and carrying their own social, cultural, linguistic, regional, and religious identities, that's why Mauritius is known as the "Little India". Many temples, Masjids, Churches and Gurudwaras etc., are very similar to India. Siva temple was built in 1867, in the village of the North part of the island, it's called "*Gokula*" and in 1872, the *Jamma* Mosque also built (Hazareesingh, 1966).

In 1920, the elite people of Hindi speaking started to call Mauritius as a "*Chhota Bharat*" (Oonk, 2007). In Mauritius, Indians celebrated the anniversary of the Indian immigration in December 1935, they obtained moral support from the Indian nationalist leaders. As well as Ravindra Nath Tagore sent his heartiest greeting to the celebration. As a result of this celebration, the Indian Cultural Association was established under the guidance of R. K. Boodhun (Prasad, 2000). 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 rule until then were still alive. Today basically, "Indian atmosphere" pervades in the Mauritian society. The population of Indian origin numerically is the most significant on the island, it is usually called the "Little India". Indian people manifest their identity through many signs of identity, among which the daily use of the Hindi, Bhojpuri, Marathi, Telegu and Tamil languages, the common wearing of Indian clothes, the selling of Indian food in the street, etc., these are most common. However, as a citizen of Mauritius, they participate in festivals and understand the different background of cultural values. Indian languages are also used in Mauritius. In Mauritius, Hindu epics are read

like *Ramayana* and *Hanuman Chalisa*. Thus, in the present day, Mauritius is a melting pot of people, languages, and cultures.

Indo-Mauritian people have a strong link with Indian communities; they exchange their cultures, ideas, and traditions. All the Hindu religious ceremonies are conducted in Indian languages, such as Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Telegu, and Tamil, but they explain meaning in creole. The Indian festivals such as *Holi*, *Diwali*, *Eid* as well as *Maha Shivaratri*, *Thaipoozan* (Telugu), *Cavadee*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Gunga Talab*, *Durga Puja*, *Gudi Padwa* (New year of Maharashtra), *Ramanavami*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Ugadi* (New year of Telugu and Kannada people) and so on (Bissoonauth, 1998; Hazareesingh, 1966; Prasad, 2000). It is not only showing the deep impact of Indian culture in Mauritius but also presents the cultural exchange between people in Mauritius.

On *Diwali*, the lamps of the soil lamp, between millions of electric bulbs, are keeping their true identity. Celebrating New Year, *Sankranti*, and Fasting-Festivals, where the trend of youth in other countries is declining, it is increasing every year in Mauritius. The only festival in Mauritius is *Maha Shivaratree* which has taken international form. These three festivals are the soul of the island.

In Mauritius, Indian food can available different varieties, which are preserved by the people of Indian origin. When the Indian people came in Mauritius as indentured labourers, they brought the varieties of Indian food and cuisine with them. The variety of food and cuisine were larger because they went from various parts of India. They were able to preserve their traditional foods and tastes with following these traditional foods, for example, *Samosa*, Pickles, *Laddu*, Tomato paste, *Chutney*, Rice and so on.

In 1901, Mahatma Gandhi visited Mauritius while returning from South Africa. His visit was a landmark in the history of Indo-Mauritians. He appealed to Indian traders and labourers to send their children to school. He encouraged the descendants of the diaspora to involve in the political arena (Prasad, 2000). Mauritius was the first country that had 44% vote for British rule and 56% for freedom in the plebiscite in 1967. Mauritius became an independent country on 12 March 1968.

After independence, in 1970, Indira Gandhi visited Mauritius and laid the foundation stone of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute. At that time, Indira Gandhi referred to Mauritius as a '*Chhota Bharat*' (Deccan Herald, 2011). Because of people of Indian origin were in the majority. Former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao had said that Considering Indian culture, religion, life-value, tradition, customs, and folk arts in Mauritius, it seems that one-day India may have to reach Mauritius in search of these values. Even if it does not apply to a hundred per cent, even then it is not baseless (Tiwari, 2014, P. 34). Recently, in 2015, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi also mentions in his speech to Mauritius as '*Chhota Bharat*' before the departure to Mauritius (The Economic Times, 2015).

The greatness of Indian culture has increased in Mauritius by the dialects and attire of different provinces of India. Now it seems like many types of Indian flowers have blossomed in the Mauritius garden. Around 70% of Indian origin people live in Mauritius, if it is called a '*Chhota Bharat*', then it should not be considered an exaggeration.

People of Indian origin, the largest ethnic group in Mauritius. They have controlled the politics of Mauritius since independence. The Indian actively participated in political activity. The first Prime minister of Mauritius, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam was of Indian origin and the present Prime minister Pravind Jugnauth is also of Indian origin. In the history of Mauritius, there was only one prime minister Paul Bérenger, who was not Indian origin.

Mauritius became *Chhota Bharat* for Indian origin people and India. India and Mauritius have a very strong relationship. That's why in 2014, the Mauritian government declared that Visa is not required for 60 days to Indian tourists. It means Indian people can easily visit Mauritius. Thus, the cultural root of the Indian migrants became strong, so they can be able to maintain their kinship relations easily. Moreover, in Mauritius, the Indian culture is one of the prominent and important cultures of Mauritius.

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