Dalit Studies

DALITS AMONG INDIAN DIASPORA IN MAURITIUS: IDENTITY, TRANSFORMATION AND INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

Mauritius is a British territory in the Indian Ocean 500 miles to the East of Madagascar. It measures 720 square miles and has a current population of 1.281 million people (World Bank, 2010). Discovered by Portuguese, most of the current generation ancestors came from France (the original settlers), Africa (slaves), India (indentured immigrants) and China (shopkeepers). Sixty-seven percent of the population of Mauritius is of Indian origin; twenty-eight percent Creole, i.e., of mixed African and/or Indian and European descent; three percent is Chinese; and two percent is European or of European origin. The majority of the Indian immigrants to Mauritius (60 percent) came from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar, while 33 percent were recruited from Southern India (Tamils, Telugus) and 7 percent from Maharashtra (Marathis). Dalits constituted 27 percent. The ethno- social and cultural assimilation of Indian Diaspora in Mauritius makes a homogenous creolic nation where caste in contemporary Mauritius is insignificant. The categories are quite fluid and new umbrella categories subsume changing caste identities. But cultural dominance of Indian sub- continent is creating caste difference to a certain extent. Caste might not matter in issues of marriages and other social practices in Mauritius but in politics it is strongly visible. The government of Mauritius has enacted the Equal Opportunities Act, in 2012 to eliminate direct or indirect discrimination on the basis of age, caste, creed, ethnic origin, impairment, marital status, place of origin, political opinion, race, sex or sexual orientation. Equal Opportunities Commission has also been established. Ministry of Social Integration and Economic Empowerment has been set up with a view to combat social exclusion. This paper aims to summarize the historical formation of the Dalit identity in Mauritius.

Keywords: *Babaji, Babuji, Bombis, calcatias, chamars, creoles, Dalit, Dusadh,* endogamy, *Kangani system,* "les indiens", Malaysia, plantocracy, social stratification, *Varna.*

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INTRODUCTION

Indian Diaspora has been a well-researched topic till date but Dalit Diaspora is something that has received scant attention from the scholars worldwide. Dalit Diaspora began to emerge during the colonial period as a result of the large-scale migration of the Indian castes on the margins to British, French as well as the Dutch colonies as indentured labour to work in the plantations. The post-colonial migration of Indians was mostly directed towards the developed countries like USA, UK, Canada as professionals and later to the Gulf and South East Asian countries as skilled labourers (Sahoo, 2006). This post-colonial migration was different from the pre-colonial migration in the sense that it was 'voluntary' and not 'forced' like the latter among the Indian Diaspora. The caste system has spread among the Indians wherever they have gone, as rightly pointed out by Jawaharlal Nehru in his formulation, "Wherever Indians go they take a piece of India with them". The caste division of India between upper and lower caste is not restricted within India but also exists among the diaspora.

Caste restrictions related to pollution may have disappeared during the immigration journey by virtue of the taboo connected to going overseas; i.e., crossing the black water (*kala pani*) itself was defiling to Hindus. Jayawardena (1971) and Clarke (1986) emphasized the importance of friendship ties and solidarity which developed between shipmates (*jahajie bhai*) of different castes which often became a more important basis of social life in the plantations than caste ties. The friends found during immigration were temporary and later replaced by kinsmen, however. Caste identities resurfaced after initial settlement. In order to explain the difficulties sub-castes found in reproducing themselves as endogamous units and maintaining restrictions on inter-caste relations, it is important to stress the composition of the immigrants and the system of recruitment.

In the debate about overseas Indian communities, the indenture system of recruitment of labourers (applied for immigrants to Mauritius) has been distinguished from the *Kangani* system of recruitment (applied for estate labourers going to Malaysia) by the fact that the recruitment was not generally done within villages or within the kin or caste networks of the recruiters. The recruiters (*arkatis*) worked in bazaar towns, attracting individuals who were already in transit, looking for work (Kelly, 1992). In the *Kangani* system, the recruiters went between estates and villages to pick up labourers, encouraged the maintenance of villages, kinship and caste ties. Mauritius falls between the two extremes due to the important role of those who had already served their first indenture contract and returned to India (Carter, 1992).

The majority of the immigrants to Mauritius (60 percent) came from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar, while 33 percent were recruited from Southern India (Tamils, Telugus) and 7 percent from Maharashtra (Marathis). Dalits constituted 27 percent and there were approx 5 percent of tribal (Munda, Santal, Oraon) recruited from Chotanagpur in Bihar. The *Varna* categories of India have different meaning in Mauritius, and incorporate greater flexibility in the caste ranking. The occupational background of the indentured Indians included palanquin-bearer, drum beater, landless labourer, sweeper, washer, beggar, hawker, shoemaker, tanner, porter or day labourer. In Mauritius, the Indian Hindus also exhibit an internal division of casteism but unlike the Indian one it does not specifically relate to occupation. Kshatriyas are called *Babuji* and Brahmins as *Babaji*. Together they form the upper castes. Each forms

around 2 percent of the Hindu population (around 10,000 each). *Vaish* belong to the middles caste. They constitute around 50 percent of Hindu population. Among the lower castes two prominent castes are Dusadh known as Rajput and Chamars known as *Raviveda*. Thus, the caste system has been maintained in its own way in Mauritius.

Sean Carey (2011) mentions that when in Mauritius he asked about the contemporary significance of caste in Hindu groups, he was told that "*caste doesn't exist anymore......people marry whoever they like*" and "*the only people who use caste are the politicians at election time*". Caste might not matter in issues of marriages and other social practices in Mauritius but in politics it is strongly visible.

The Dalit Diaspora have now started organizing itself worldwide. They have created their own organizations to develop social solidarity with different Dalit communities. In this context the member of the 'new' Diaspora which are people who migrated voluntarily as 'free passengers' to Malaysia and Mauritius took the lead. The Dalit International Organization organized the first Dalit World Conference in Malaysia on the theme, '*A Vision Towards a Caste-less Society*' during Oct 10-11, 1998. Till 1997, Dalits in Malaysia who are mostly from Tamil Nadu organized Tamil conferences jointly with the non-Dalit Tamils. But later, they realized that this collaboration was serving no purpose and the Dalits began to organize themselves independently. The Dalits have formed an independent Dalit political party, Indian Progressive Front (Kumar, 2004). On the other hand the Dalit Diaspora in Mauritius remains with the majority Hindu group in the country and have not formed an independent political party to assert their identity. However, the Dalit diaspora in Mauritius is not a very small population and come only after the Vaishyas (middle caste) in terms of number.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SETTING IN MAURITIUS

Mauritius is a British territory in the Indian Ocean 500 miles to the East of Madagascar. Mauritius was discovered by the Portuguese in the early years of the sixteenth century and was named 'Cerne' (after the boat of Diego Fernandiz Percira) who discovered the island. It measures 720 square miles and has a population of 1.281 million people (World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2010) whose ancestors come from France (the original settlers), Africa (slaves), India (indentured immigrants) and China (shopkeepers). Mauritius did not have original inhabitants. Though it was known to Arab sailors during the middle ages, it was the Portuguese who used the island to stock their ships. They made no attempt to settle in the island but released pigs, goats, monkeys and rats, all of which changed the ecology of the island to a great extent by displacing and destroying the indigenous flora and fauna.

The Dutch settlers

In 1598, Wybrant Warvick came and took possession of the island naming it Mauritius after the Prince Maurice of Nassau. The early Dutch exported ebony wood from here to Europe where it was used in the manufacturing of guns and firearms. To cut the forest, they brought slaves from Africa and Madagascar. Sharp decline in the prices of the ebony wood in Europe and unfavourable climatic conditions forced the Dutch to abandon the island in 1710 A.D. Though they destroyed their establishment before leaving, they left a few runway slaves behind in the forest.

The French settlers

Five years later the French took possession of the island. The most notable French Governor of Mauritius was Mahe de Labourdonnais (1735-1746A.D.). He gave training to artisans to build forts, barracks and ships and got the harbor of Port Louis developed. He introduced coffee, sugar, spices, maize, vegetables, fruits and livestock to Mauritius. Labourdonnais, who was familiar with conditions in the south of India, arranged for some hundreds of highly skilled men to be brought over from Pondicherry in order to assist him with the colonization of the island. "*These Indian workmen*", observes Baron Grant (1886) in his book on Mauritius, "*had the features of Europeans and were a very mild and gentle people. They were jealous of their national costumes and all of them wore large gold earrings and silver bracelets at their wrists*". Those who could not be employed in the skilled jobs were engaged as domestic servants by the French settlers and, Grant has further recorded, when their work was over "they would move about with canes and daggers just like European running footmen". Before the arrival of Labourdonnais and prior to the engagement of the Indian workers even the slightest repairs to ships in the local harbour could not be attended to. In 1731A.D., when he set out with an expedition to conquer Madras, he was able to build his own ships in which he sailed with his Creole regiments "which were drawn from the white, coloured and black population". There can be no doubt that in mounting this expedition, Labourdonnais found in his Indian workmen most of the skill he needed to build his fleet. They had come from the south of India which in the past had been famous for its high maritime traditions. Mukherji in his "*Indian Shipping*" refers to the activities of Hindu navigators in the fifteenth century and speaks of the construction of ocean-going vessels which measured "176 cubic in length, 20 in breath..." (Hazareesingh, 1966).

Labourdonnais brought Indians from Pondicherry to work as artisans, messengers and for domestic aid, though African slaves were used as the main labour force. Further, he annexed Seychelles in 1743A.D. In 1746 A.D., he sailed to India and relieved Pondicherry from the British. He also captured Madras. In 1794 A.D., the French National Assembly passed a resolution for removal of slavery system. The French settlers in Mauritius refused to apply the law and constituted a parallel government. Between 1796 and 1803 A.D., Mauritius had an independent rebel government and continued with slavery.

However, when Charles Decaear captured the island on behalf of Napoleon and re-established French control in 1803 A.D., he decreed only persons of 'pure blood' as equals. Slavery and slave trade was allowed to continue. Then arrived the second generation of Indians, who came from Peninsular India, under the administration of Governor Decaen (1803-1810A.D.). They were also drawn from the skilled ranks and were mostly Tamils. They were used to construct houses, schools, hospitals and other public buildings. But the new Indian immigrants were quite different from those who had come during the time of Labourdonnais. They had not the same powers of resistance to the pressures of social change from the local indigenous society and they soon lost all their national identity. In these circumstances it was easy to bring them within the pale of Western cultural influence. They became Christians, adopted European names, and by 1810A.D. they had all merged with the mixed population of the island and lost all traces of their native culture. Muslims however were more self-assertive

and were successful in keeping intact their   own religion. They managed to build a mosque in the western suburb of Port-Louis.

The British settlers

During the Anglo-French War in the 18th century, the French used L'Ile de France to attack the British settlements in India and British ships in the Indian Ocean. During the Napoleonic war, these attacks increased. The British captured Rodrigue in 1809A.D. and subsequently with the help of a large naval force captured Bourbon (now Reunion), Chagos and other smaller islands too. However, by the Treaty of Paris in 1814 A.D., Britain returned Bourbon to France and retained L'Ile de France, Seychelles and Rodrigue. When the British flag was hoisted on Government House in December 1810, "*Port-Louis resembled a vast bazaar, where Indian and European met for trade; the only difficulty*", reports an observer, "*was a vexing ignorance of each other's language*" (Pike, 1873). These Indians must have prospered economically for at least two of them had, during the early years of British rule, came into possession of large sugar cane plantations and were thus enjoying social status almost equal to that of the French settlers (Frere, 1875). In any case, they and the other resident Indians had nothing in common with the society of the Indian immigrants who came in 1834 under the British administration of the island. Between 1835 and 1907, an estimated 500,000 indentured labourers, two-thirds of which were Bhojpuri, arrived in Mauritius (Deerpalsingh, 2000: 45)

It may not be out of place to mention in passing that India has not always been only a recruiting ground for workers to be employed in the sugar plantations of Mauritius. When the island was captured by the British in 1810, Indian troops from Bengal, Madras and Ceylon served in the expedition and the following tribute was paid to them when they returned to their base:

"*The whole of the Indian troops employed on the late expedition against the islands of Bourbon and Mauritius having returned to Fort St. George, the Honorable the Governor General in Council performs a satisfactory part of his duty in requesting that His Excellency the Commander in Chief will be pleased to convey to the several Indian Corps and detachments which served at the conquest of those islands, the public thanks of the government for the alacrity with which they embarked on that service, for the gallantry which they displayed when opposed to the enemy, and for their uniform good conduct on all occasions during their period of their absence from the coast*"

(Wilson, 1882)

Social Stratification in Mauritius

Sixty-seven percent of the population of Mauritius is of Indian origin; twenty-eight percent is Creole, i.e., of mixed African and/or Indian and European descent; three percent is Chinese; and two percent is European or of European origin. Each of these ethnic categories can be further subdivided: the Indians into Hindus and Muslims and five linguistic categories, the Creoles according to color, the Chinese into Christian and non-Christian, and the Europeans into English and French. Mauritius is a plural society, but the principles in general use to mark off the sections within it are varied. Thus, ethnic origin, language, color, national origin, and

religion have been used here to differentiate sections of the population. These are all basically ascribed statuses.

The majority of immigrants (60 percent) came from eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, while 33 percent were recruited from southern India (Tamils, Telugus) and 7 percent from Maharashtra (Marathis). As a result, the Indians were quite heterogeneous in terms of caste, religion, linguistic affiliation, and regional origin. The majorities were poor peasants, artisans, and agricultural workers, but they were not all of low caste. More than half of the Hindus belonged to agricultural, shepherd, and artisan castes, referred to as clean castes in northern India. The low castes amounted to 27 percent and there were approximately 5 percent tribals (Munda, Santal, Oraon) recruited from Chota Nagpur in Bihar. The high castes (Brahmin and Kshatriya) constituted some 13 percent of the immigrants. In the initial phase of indenture, women constituted less than 10 percent of the immigrants, which led to competition for them in the estate camps. In the 1850s steps were taken to increase the proportion of women and they soon constituted one-third of the immigrants.

Ethnic and Cultural Criteria

On the basis of ethnic origin, one can distinguish categories derived from Europe, Africa, India and China. There is however a large category whose antecedents were both African and European which is difficult to place in such simple classificatory system. A further difficulty is the prolonged residence of all categories except the Britons in Mauritius so that strictly speaking all are of Mauritian birth and nationality. Yet, except to foreigners or when overseas, few Mauritians identify themselves or others as Mauritian. Instead they use an appellation of nationality, religion, color, or some finer distinction of caste, sect, or linguistic origin. It depends on the context of which sort of appellation is being used, for they are not all mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, primary identification is nearly always with a section smaller than the total national group. In this there is a difference in degree rather than kind from societies in which individuals identify themselves with a tribe or kin-group (Morris, 1956).

Language

If we take language as a criterion differentiating sections of the population, we find that each ethnic section has a language or group of languages associated with it. Yet, within sections, finer distinctions can be made on the basis of linguistic origin, and several languages traverse linguistic and ethnic origins and provide links between communities. Language can become symbolic of the differentiation between sections in a political context, as disputes in Mauritius, India, and other countries have shown. Language can also become symbolic of upward social mobility. A rise in the social and economic scale in Mauritius often leads to the abandonment of the local Creole *patois* or of an Indian language in favor of French or English. This is an example of the way in which cultural traits of those in the upper social strata are used as reference points for those lower down. It demonstrates the necessity of looking at a plural society as a single social system and not as separate social systems only making contact in the economic sphere.

Religion

Similarly, each ethnic group has one or more religion associated with it. Yet within sections

there are many distinctions of ceremony and sect and a number of religions traverse ethnic and linguistic boundaries. As with language, religion can become an important political symbol in some contexts differentiating political blocs. It can also become symbolic of upward social mobility by conversion to Christianity. In Mauritius, only the Christian religion has significant representations in each of the major ethnic sections. Awareness of other religions is one of the characteristics of plural society in Mauritius. That requires not only awareness of differences but also identifying similarities. Beliefs and practices of one religion are often rationalized in terms of another. In this process, it is usually the religions of the lower strata, Hinduism and Islam which are rationalized in terms of the higher, Christianity. In the villages all of which are multi-racial, one rarely hears the adherent of one religion dismissing other religion as idle superstition. Instead there is a belief in the popular efficacy of other religions, particularly of other saints, deities and rituals. Thus the knowledge of other religions is an important part of the belief systems of many Mauritians, and again emphasizes the importance of treating the whole society as a single social system.

Such criteria as ethnic origin, language, and religion are only significant group determinants in a political context. Here they become symbolic not so much of cultural separateness as of lower political status. If Roman Catholicism and the Church of England receive government subsidies in Mauritius, Indians want similar subsidies for Hinduism and Islam. If French and English are taught in schools, there are Indian demands for Urdu, Tamil, and Hindi. Nadel's (1951) definition of social strata as aggregates of individuals who share in relevant respects the same status, leads us to ask what the relevant features are. As Nadel is at pains to point out, they do not refer to all physiological and behavioral differences, but chiefly to access to political status and wealth. It is in these contexts that ethnic and cultural differences can become important because they can serve as symbols of differential status. This can be seen in the use of stereotypes to define social distance and differential status. As Morris (1956) has shown in East Africa, members of one section tend to regard other sections as undifferentiated.

Stereotypes

In Mauritius, the Franco-Mauritian refers to "*les indiens*" and is scarcely aware of the many differences of caste, sect, and linguistic origin which differentiate such a category. Similarly, the Indian is unaware of the many social gradations among "*les blancs*". Both tend to regard the Chinese as similarly undifferentiated. Such stereotypes ought to be assessed in the context in which they are uttered. The Chinese shopkeeper will be aware of many of the distinctions among the Indians and Creoles in the village in which he has his shop. The Franco-Mauritian estate manager may be similarly aware of distinctions among the laborers inhabiting his estate camp. In a Franco-Mauritian drawing-room, white and black are adequate distinctions, but in politics Hindu and Muslim may be more significant, while in the occupational sphere Indian and Creole may become the important categories. The tendency for individuals of one section of the plural society to look on the others as undifferentiated appears to be a function of lack of communication between individuals of different sections. It is most pronounced where the social distance is greatest. From the Franco-Mauritian drawing-room the Indian village is socially remote. Physically it is rarely more than a quarter of a mile. Where social contact is more frequent and sustained, this undifferentiated stereotype breaks down. The Chinese

shopkeeper knows not only the ethnic and religious differences among his clientele but also their individual differences in wealth and power.

DALITS AMONG INDIAN DIASPORA IN MAURITIUS

The Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus have four major castes that are interpreted locally as *varnas*. They no longer represent strictly endogamous units (sub-castes), but rather are extended social groups, interconnected by marriage and kinship, which often cut across caste lines.

The *Varna* categories of India have different meaning in Mauritius, and incorporate greater flexibility in the caste ranking. It is quite peculiar that an aggregation of cultivator and artisan castes such as Kurmi, Koeri, Ahir, Kahar, Teli, Noniya, Kumhar and Lohar who are clean castes in Northern India (Uttar Pradesh), adopt a common term *Vaish* in Mauritius by means of intermarriages. Some of these sub-castes, whose ritual status is relatively low in the localized caste hierarchies of northern India, and recognized as belonging to Shudra varna, were incorporated within clean castes and given equal rank. Many sub-castes had few members and a disproportion of men to women, so could not reproduce themselves as endogamous units. Therefore they allied themselves by marriage to other castes of relatively equal rank. This transformation and merging of sub-castes into a larger caste category, the *Vaish*, was not accompanied by any processes like sanskritization, which would accompany collective caste mobility. One ethnic category based on regional and linguistic identity was also incorporated into the *Vaish* by intermarriages, notably the Bengalis; i.e., immigrants from West Bengal and Calcutta. Each of these sub-castes had very few members and had no other choice than to marry persons belonging to related castes, and gradually the *Vaish* evolved as a new endogamous unit. It is not uncommon that a Hindu identifies himself as a *Vaish* even if his father is a Kurmi, his mother a Lohar, while he himself married an Ahir. Many people are not aware of the particular sub-caste a person belongs to because it is not important among people belonging to the *Vaish* category, as all are considered equal (Hollup, 1994).

Those claiming Kshatriya status are regarded as high caste (grand *nasyon*) and known as *Babujee* among the Hindus. High-caste people tend to identify themselves by their surname, in which "Singh" appears among the *Babujees* who claim Kshatriya status and "*Sharma*" for those who are Brahmin (or *Maraz* as they are also called in Mauritius). However, there are many Babujee and Brahmin families who are not named Singh or Sharma, and some claim that even the appearance of Singh in the surname is not a reliable indicator of high-caste identity because some people have changed their names in order to pass as high caste during and after emigration (Jayawardena, 1971). Although vegetarianism and Puranic ritual traditions are sometimes associated with high-caste identity, many followers of the Hindu reformist sects, such as Arya Samaj and Kabir Panthi, with different caste backgrounds have adopted vegetarianism. Since Puranic rituals are adopted by *Vaish* and orthodox Hindus (*Sanatanists*) in general, hardly anything distinguishes one caste from another, and in this sense the term homogenization is applied to Hindus.

According to the immigration registers, some people had entered either "Rajput" or "Chettri" as their caste. It was probably because those sharing a common Kshatriya status were the ones who started to call themselves or were addressed as *Babujees* by others in

the late nineteenth century. *Babujee* does not denote a caste but is rather an indefinite term which stands for respect and it came to embrace members of several castes associated with the Kshatriya varna. Another indication of high caste identity associated with the *Babujees* is the performance of the *tilak* ritual prior to weddings, following Puranic ritual traditions. Puranic wedding rites and rituals are associated with the orthodox Hindus (Sanatanists), to which the majority of Hindus belong. The Tilak ceremony is when the bride's relatives visit the bridegroom's home and present him with gifts of fruit, flowers, clothes, and money, to indicate their acceptance of the union. Although the ritual is associated with high castes, it is also performed by some Vaish to signify wealth and increase the family's prestige.

In most camps (Union Vale, Trois-Boutiques, Chemin-Grenier), all castes joined the same *kalimai* ('plantation shrine'), each individual coming there to pray to his/her god(dess) under the name he/she preferred. Though prayers (*priyer*) varied: for *Baharia puja*, one of the major ceremonies in such shrines, the Babujee-Maraz would not perform any sacrifice, the Vaish would sacrifice goats and the Shudra, pigs. An older labourer-woman from Union Vale camp also remembers that, in her youth (in the 1930s-40s), the order for distributing *prasad* ('sanctified offerings') followed caste hierarchy. Since then, the proliferation of *kalimai*, included inside each camp (such as in Beau-Fond, L'Escalier or Mon Désert-Mon Trésor), has caused or accompanied the split of shrines into *grand-* and *ti- nasyon*: there was 'a *kalimai* for the Vaish and one for the Chamar.'(Claveyrolas, 2015)

High castes' prestige does not derive from superior ritual status but is the result of economic and political power. In the plantations relatively more high-caste people became overseers among the indentured laborers because they enjoyed respect from lower castes, and they were accustomed to exercise traditional authority. They also had little education. The high castes, Brahmins (*Babajee*) and the *Babujee*, became united by intermarriage in Mauritius. They obtained some privileged positions as overseers and contractors, and were among the first Indians to benefit financially through the acquisition of land as small planters and entrepreneurs. The first community leaders among the Hindus (in socio-religious associations and political parties) were mostly of high caste and they also came to occupy important positions in the government bureaucracy. They protected their relatives of the same caste and recruited them for government jobs, prior to and after Independence. This practice of nepotism gradually turned into casteism which was accompanied by increasing competition for scarce resources (state patronage) among the Hindus.

Caste Identities

Caste identity as a ritual status makes no sense anymore, yet remains a matter of prestige or esteem. There have been many inter-caste and interethnic marriages (between Hindu-Tamil, Hindu-Telugu,or Hindu-Marathi), but most marriages tend to be caste or varna- endogamous. There are no strong sanctions or opposition within the family or extended kin group against inter-caste marriages. It is probably only Rajputs (Dusadh) and Raviveda (Chamar) who come closest to being endogamous sub-castes, partly because they were excluded by other castes for a long time on the basis of their previous habit of eating pork and rearing pigs.

Have these caste differences come to be regarded not in terms of a hierarchy but merely

as a separation or division of categories? Caste here is not supported by an ideology of purity and Hindus are no longer caste-conscious in the sense that they know other people's caste identity. A person's claim to membership in a specific caste does not need to be recognized or validated by others. Hypergamy is widely practiced, and when a lower-caste (Shudra) woman marries an Ahir (Vaish) or a high-caste Babujee, she takes her husband's caste status, as when a Telugu woman from a wealthy landowning family marries a Brahmin. The flexibility related to caste membership allows for a great deal of individual mobility. Caste membership may be a matter of some concern in wealthy families, as among the middle class, because it relates to prestige. But there is a clear tendency among the younger generation to ignore caste divisions altogether. Clarke (1986:96) says that "*caste could be set in the balance against class when defining an individual's status. Occupation and wealth determined a Hindu's social standing in secular affairs, and caste either added to or detracted from it*". If someone marries a person from a low caste, he attempts to hide this fact, but when the opposite occurs he is proud of it. In this respect, there is still a feeling of inferiority about belonging to lower castes, and the opposition of high (*grand nasyon*) and low caste (*ti nasyon*) still prevails. But family wealth, occupational status, and educational qualifications now transcend caste boundaries. A poor Vaish family would prefer to marry their daughter to a low-caste man with a white-collar job and good income because they are more concerned with the material well-being of the girl than what neighbors may say about the husband's caste background.

Most Hindu sub-communities in Mauritius assemble in 'socio-cultural associations' formed along caste lines (Gahlot Rajput Maha Sabha, the organisation of the Rajput caste, or Vaish Mukhti Sangh, for the Vaish caste). The reformist Arya Samaj, imported to Mauritius in the beginning of the 20th century, denounces the caste system in principle. But the organisation split along caste lines again, resulting in the creation of the Arya Ravived Pracharini Sabha in 1935 by Chamar Dalits, and renamed '*Ravived*'.

The very existence of lower castes is disturbing to many in Mauritius. Hollup in his fieldwork found that the names of untouchable castes such as Chamar or Dusadh, and their practices such as pig rearing, are only evoked discretely (*sous-tapi*) and with aversion. ''Eyes down, one person spoke in a whisper about 'these people' (*sa boug-la*) eating 'these things' (*lotte zaffer*) and switched from Creole to Bhojpuri evoking '*hawe… ou kone, hawe, soowar*' (that… you know, that, pig) or using images ('*sa zaffer lake tourne*' [that with a corkscrew tail]) and euphemisms (*chawwna,* piglet). Their raising, sacrificing and eating pork would be the reason why Samajist Chamars were excluded from commensality and intermarriage with other Samajists, which eventually caused the group to split'' (Hollup, 1994). ''Lower castes are also associated with negative characteristics: the Chamar are dirty, alcoholic and quarrelsome. An undisciplined child is scolded: '*You act like a Chamar*!' The dark complexion of lower castes is also noted, as well as their way of talking: rude (*grossyer*) and aggressive (*batayer*). It is supposedly even 'impolite' to pronounce the word Chamar, which is why 'it is better to say *Ravived*.'' (Claveyrolas, 2015)

Just as in India, Mauritian lower castes often choose the path of sanskritisation, using the caste system's potential for social ascension rather than trying to get free from it. The Chamar

Dalits have become the Ravived, and the Dusadh the Rajput (a Kshatriya category), by founding in 1965 the Gahlot Rajput Maha Sabha—which has existed in India since 1923 (Servan-Schreiber, 2010: 36).

One may think that class or ethnic identity overrides caste identity. Actually these divergent identities sometimes are combined to increase one's prestige. Although caste was detached from the ideology that legitimized hierarchical ranking and reduced to a matter of prestige, caste prestige is interconnected with and dependent on other status criteria such as income, wealth, occupation, and property. *Terminological transformation* (Mathieu Claveyrolas, 2015) of the caste names have not completely obliterated the prejudice against the lower castes (*ti nasyon*). Despite the diminishing importance of caste, high-caste status still carries prestige and due to the prestige associated with high castes, there is a tendency for people to try to marry their children to high-caste mates. Hypergamy and hypogamy are to some extent intended to accumulate or increase one's prestige. Hypogamy is facilitated by the fact that the lower-caste man compensates with wealth, education, a well-paid government job, and a good family reputation, which are highly valued assets. However, the prestige associated with high castes derives from power and socio-economic position rather than from religion, as in India.

INTEGRATION AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF INDIANS IN MAURITIUS

The indentured Indian labourers, in contrast to the slaves came to Mauritius in family groups- sometimes whole villages indentured together. The Hindus as well as the Muslim faiths have proved far more resilient cores of cultures in the face of Christianity than had been the case with the animism of the slaves. When the Indian indentured labour arrived in Mauritius, the political power was with the British and slavery had been abolished. The Indians tried to maintain their distinct culture and associations thus not mixing with the Creoles. British power also shielded the indentured labourers from the full integrative thoroughness of Creolisation, enabling them to salvage some shreds of the cultures of India. This does not mean that the Indians did not integrate with the Creoles. It was vital for the Indians to learn to speak Creole. Marriage and long term unions with Creole females were also not uncommon.

The British colonial legislation entitles Indians to buy land in Mauritius. Through hard work, exploitation of fellow countrymen and favors from the creole planters, some Indians amassed money and acquired property. A few became rich sugar estate owners in their own right while many more became 'small planters', owning anything from less than one to several acres of cane land. Just under half of the cultivated land of Mauritius today is owned by the descendents of the indentured labourers. Land ownership provided the Indians with an economic base to finance the education of their sons for access to government jobs and the professions.

Government employment was more keenly sought after by the upwardly-mobile Indians, since in the sugar industry all the good posts were in the hands of the creoles and thus out of reach for the descendents of the coolies. While in the administration and other sectors where

the state had direct control, it was not necessary to abandon 'Indianness' and become integrally creolised to get a job. What was required was British type education and this was available to 'Indians' who could afford it.

Thus, slowly first and then more rapidly after the World War II, a new fraction of 'petty bourgeoisie' emerged out of the descendents of the indentured labourers. This new fraction was well aware of the cultural dimensions of the contradiction between the British administration and the creoles and saw there an opportunity to gain favours with the political rulers by stressing its attachment to the English language and British institutions. The independence of India had revived confidence and pride in the languages and cultures of the sub-continent, furthering the reluctance of the new fractions of the petty-bourgeoisie to merge itself into a creole hierarchy where 'whiteness' and the French language were dominant ideological features. Significantly the renewed attraction of the motherland of Hinduism enhanced rather than detracted them from acquiring the prestige of English in the eyes of the new fraction of the petty bourgeoisie as that language came to be associated with modern independent India as well as with the British administration which provided the government jobs.

British wanted to leave Mauritius and therefore proceeded to undermine the original class-oriented Mauritius Labour Party (M.L.P.) displace its more radical leaders, and facilitate the petty bourgeoisie fraction which had emerged from the indentured labourers. This leadership was groomed to succeed the British in office and the suffrage was gradually extended to the sugar proletariat to provide it with a large ethnic electoral base.

The Indians had also preserved a number of divisions articulated into the power structure which could be as significant in politics as the creole/ Indian dichotomy. Places of origin in India, associated with languages, could become symbols of allegiance in the political context. Thus a minority known locally as 'Madras' and associated with Tamil- and a sub-section of it with Telegu- could be differentiated politically from the '*calcatia*' majority. Some 'Madras' had arrived in Mauritius when the island was under French rule and were fully creolized by the time the bulk of the Indians arrived. This contributed to the 'Madras' being more readily Francophone and not unwilling at times to ally themselves with the creoles in politics. Another smaller minority known as '*Bombi*' - those whose ancestors shipped out of Bombay- was associated with the Marathi language, could also from a particular grouping at times differentiating itself from the '*calcatias*' in the political context.

In the circumstances of Mauritius it was difficult to keep alive the divisions of labour and the interdict concomitants of caste. But articulated with the class system of the plantation society, caste could still play a significant role in politics. Thus the creole planters sometimes gave the more responsible jobs of Sirdar- a kind of field foreman- to high caste '*calcatias*' because of their authority over the other labourers. The '*calcatias*', associated with Hindi, represent the large majority of Mauritian Hindus. Caste plays a more significant role among '*calcatias*' than among the smaller ethnic groups. With more opportunity to amass wealth and land and opportunity to move up the social scale, the '*calcatias*' high caste, were over-represented in the leadership of the Mauritius Labour Party(M.L.P.). Other political parties have exploited the real and imaginary casteism of the Labour Party to win the votes of the lower castes. The Independent Forward Bloc (I.F.B) was particularly adroit in harnessing the caste factor against the

M.L.P. Grown out of a Hindu revivalist movement, influenced by Gandhian ideas which contributed to the awakening of politics among the 'Indian' masses, the I.F.B. criticized the leader of the M.L.P. for their elitist 'British' lifestyle, accused them of corruption and misleading 'the small men'. The I.F.B. mobilized a significant following among the sugar proletariat, notably in the south of Mauritius, and was a hindrance to the Labour Party and its British patrons. But it was the division between Hindus and Muslims in politics which made the British project of transferring power to an ethnic majority particularly problematic.

The Muslims of Mauritius have for the most part descended from the indentured labourers who came from India under the same conditions as the Hindus. However, a small but significant group of Gujarati speaking Muslims came to the island as traders in grain and cotton cloth. These rich merchants escaped the creolisation process on the plantations and have kept their language and culture of origin, maintaining contacts with other Gujarati communities in India and East Africa. As merchant capital, the Gujarati have always held a special relationship with the creole planters and the British administration. In recent years, the Gujarati merchants have entered into partnership with creole capital in the docks and in industry while retaining a strong position in the import trade. The Muslim merchants were the first merchants of Indian origins to have a voice in politics, taking an active role in the affairs of Port-Louis, the capital of the island. The Gujaratis took the lead in establishing religious and cultural institutions that helped maintain a sense of ethnic identity among the Muslim labourers, differentiating them from the Hindus.

The plantocracy had tended to favor Muslims for more skilled jobs on the sugar estates and in the firms of the capital. Many Muslims today are the petty traders and taxi owners of the capital, and run garages, repair shops, and filling stations. The Muslim/ Hindu opposition is at least in part the translation in ethnic terms of the urban/ rural conflict of interest. At election times, the voice of the Muslims can be decisive in Port-Louis.

From the point of view of ethnic politics, the Muslim vote has been crucial since decolonization. The strategies of parties and alliances to capture it have dominated Mauritian politics. The electoral system, the boundaries of the constituencies, the entrenchment of 'communalism' in the independence constitution, can all be seen as the reflection of the key position occupied by the Muslims in the ethnic political struggle for power at the time of independence. The short but murderous bout of ethnic violence in a suburb of the capital on the eve of independence was the sequel to the intensity of the struggle for the Muslim vote in the last stage of decolonization. The Gujarati Muslim merchants had originally been the political allies of the plantocracy in the *Parti Mauricien.* But infighting in the city politics of the capital, the clash of personalities and opportunism had led some of the merchants to form their own political party, the *Communaute d' Action Musulmane* (CAM) which contracted an allegiance with the M.L.P. What the Muslim leaders really wanted to deal with M.L.P. was support for their communal demands in decolonization in return for support over independence.

The ethno- social and cultural assimilation of Indian diaspora in Mauritius makes a homogenous creolic nation where caste in contemporary Mauritius is insignificant. But cultural dominance of Indian sub- continent is creating caste difference to a certain extent. The contribution of the majority of the lower classes population of Mauritius in nation building has been

immense and it is necessary to provide equal opportunity to them to bloom and zoom in the changing global international scenario.

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