



Social Change among Indians in Mauritius During the 19th and 20th Centuries

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ABSTRACT:

Indians who went to Mauritius whether as slaves or indentured labour or as free citizens carried with them the cultural baggage of the times of their migration. The sheer large numbers of Indian migrants altered the demography of a tiny Mauritian island. The impressions of Indian culture were widespread. The Indian value system kept on guiding them through their stay in Mauritius which kept the Indian way of life intact in Mauritius. The global changes and intensification of global interaction compelled the Mauritian governments and people to adopt the changes for their development. Universal suffrage, education and standardized legal system were the major factors that provided an opportunity to migrants to demand for citizens' rights in Mauritius. These forces were so strong that they impacted not only economy and polity but brought about a fundamental shift in the socio-cultural life of Indians in Mauritius. The present paper analysis the social change in Indians in Mauritius in the 19th and 20th Century. It attempts to understand social change in Mauritius during the 19th and 20th centuries through the impact of modernization processes. Out of the several aspects of modernization processes, the impact of factors such as universal suffrage, standardized legal system and education have been dealt with in detail.

Introduction

Mauritius is a small island in the West Indian Ocean with an enchanting history and fascinating geography. It is notable for have been remained uninhabited till as recently as the 16th century. Despite its strategic location near to, both the Asia land mass and Africa, that is, near the East Coast of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, India, and the Far East, it remained insignificant and unnoticed. All the surrounding regions of Mauritius were part of a well-connected global oceanic trading network. Geography apparently is the biggest contributor to its isolation from the human habitation. Its invisibility due to its small size in the vast Ocean coupled with its lack of human habitation kept it secluded. Additionally, the patterns of trade winds of the East Coast of Africa might not have permitted sailors to venture beyond a specific point. Human habitation that began in the 16th century was by chance discovery of the Island by Domingo Fernandez, a Portuguese sailor who established it as a temporary visiting base. Then on Dutch, French and

British occupied it. The coming of slaves, shopkeepers, artisans and indentured labour from various regions of Asia and Africa shaped the destiny of Mauritius with the ruling European dispensation.

The extended presence of various migrant groups likely led to the understanding that Mauritius would be their permanent home. Then the sheer large numbers of Indian migrants altered the demography of a tiny Mauritian island. The impressions of Indian culture were widespread. The Indian value system kept on guiding them through their stay in Mauritius which kept the Indian way of life intact. The realization of their settling forever in Mauritius and, their deplorable conditions sparked demands for political, economic, and social rights in the host country. The geostrategic changes and intensification of global interaction further compelled the Mauritian government to adopt certain changes for the people settled there. The colonialists introduced measures to grant some rights to the people because of both internal and external pressures. Universal suffrage,



a standardized legal system, and education system were introduced. These factors rolled in the process of modernization in Mauritius. These forces were so strong that they impacted not only economy and polity but brought about a fundamental shift in the socio-cultural life of Indians in Mauritius.

Universal Suffrage

The new Mauritian society, completely settled by the colonials for their political and economic interests in the uninhabited island highlights the complexity of providing political citizenship to the 'outsider'. A complete lack of political rights led to the denial of human rights. The Council of Government came into existence in 1825 but by 1831 it was modified. Teelock (2001, p 334) argues that its initial composition could hardly be said to be representative of the population of Mauritius as "the governor chose only those who were of European descent and ignored members of the 'Free' (coloured) population who qualified for these posts." In 1828, barring coloureds was abolished in principle but it was only whites who continued to be appointed as officers. There was very little sharing of power. The petition of Remy Ollier, a journalist, to Queen Victoria led to permitting coloured in the Council of Government little later. In 1880s the demand for the formation of a 'representative' Government was made by the Reform Movement.

Mathur (1984) says that "a very high franchise qualifications were favored by most leaders but the Democrats fought for a lower voting qualifications to benefit Indians and General population." A liberal, the Earl of Derby lowered property qualifications and allowed Indians to appear for education test in their native language. Mathur (1984) notes that "the outcome of the Reform Movement was the constitutional change of 1885, when for the first time in the history of Mauritians there was going to be elections and for the first time the people would be entitled to vote by secret ballot for the representatives of the Legislative Council." Only a section of the people was entitled to vote. The right to vote was for only male British subjects who had the requisite qualifications. The women were denied the right to vote by the constitution of 1885. Teelock (2001, p 332) reports that "before 1885 all the members of the Legislature were nominated members. The Indians were debarred indirectly from the vote as it required the elector

should know technical English." The new Constitution of 1885 had a Council of Government with 27 members. Out of which, only ten were elected, exclusively male with designated property and education qualifications. This excluded a vast majority of coloureds.

The old Constitution of 1885 got amended only in 1947 and was replaced by a new Constitution. The new constitution granted voting rights to all those who could qualify a simple literacy test in the languages of the Colony which the government approved. It was a landmark decision in the history of the Constitution of Mauritius that brought a paradigm shift in the voting rights of the coloured. Addison & Hazareesingh (1984, p 88) says that "nearly two-fifths of the adult population could not vote" as they could not meet the education or property requirements. For the first time in Mauritius, the electorate included significant numbers of workers. The franchise extended to women, both for the right to vote and to stand for election provided equality to women and citizenship rights. Wills (1966) notes that still "in the elections of 1886 there were only 4,061 registered voters, including only 295 of Asian origin, out of a population of 359,419 (per the 1881 census)."

A new round of constitutional discussions began by 1950s. Bowman (1991) found that the new issues which were discussed were those of granting voting rights to unfranchised and redefining the Mauritian constituencies. Bowman (1991, p 35) says that, "An electoral commission appointed by the British recommended complete universal suffrage, forty single-member constituencies and a unique provision whereby the governor could nominate "best losers" (that is, candidates who did well but still lost) to the Legislative Council to ensure adequate representation of all communities." Thus, universal suffrage was granted in 1959 because of the hard work of the working class. For the first time anyone over the age of 21 had the vote irrespective of wealth and academic qualifications. So, one man one vote became a reality.

Standardized Legal System

Mauritius was a British colony from 1810-1968. During the British rule, Mauritius had a traditional legal system that was particularistic and non-egalitarian. As far as the legal system was concerned the operation of law was initially partial under different colonial powers due the lack of law and order and an organized form of political



structure in the country. Different ethnic groups had differential treatment in the eyes of law. Later, British introduced a legal system which was based on the principles of universalism, rationalism and individualism. Mauritian legislation emphasized the humanistic values and democratization of public life. Mathur (1986, p 73) argues that, "Constitutional reforms were initiated to bridge the gap between the ruling elite and the masses and to ensure the Government is responsive to the demands of the governed." With the coming of new constitution on 12 March 1968, Mauritius became a sovereign democratic state. The Constitution of the Republic of Mauritius (1968) states that, "this Constitution is the supreme law of Mauritius and if any other law is inconsistent with this Constitution, that other law shall, to the extent of the inconsistency, be void."

The fundamental rights and freedom of all individuals were safeguarded. Private property, the individual's freedom of choice of expression, and individuals who belonged to trade unions and other associations were also protected. Hazareesingh (1975, p143) reiterates that the freedom of movement and protection from discrimination on the grounds of race, color, creed, or sex were also part of the Constitution. The statute book now contains comprehensive legislation in the field of labour, education and Health, aiming at the social and economic advancement of the masses." These legislations were instrumental in bringing about the changes that facilitated to minimize the caste and class distance and distinctions in the Indians in Mauritius.

Mauritians, with its vision of modernizing their country, brought about gradual changes in their legal provisions that enabled to abolish many undesirable social customs of Indo-Mauritians. Modernization also led to fading of the caste disabilities and caste rigidities. Caste endogamy which is one of the most important features of Indian caste system helps to preserve caste distinctions is withering slowly and antagonistic feeling is disappearing. Inter-caste marriages are not unheard of but still initial preference is for finding match within the caste. According to Boodhoo (1993, p 641), "in fact, socially speaking, casteism is practically non-existent, it only raises its head in matters of politics." Voting rights of women and granting women the right to stand for election has provided a visible change in the status of women that has a cascading effect in the other arenas. Now women enjoy equal status with men.

Gender discrimination was highly prevalent with Hindu girls not given the same privileges as the boys. The Arya Samaj movement in Mauritius proactively campaigned for the emancipation of women. Boodhoo (1993, p 641) states that, "as far as widow remarriage is concerned, Mauritian society is rather flexible. The practice of widow remarriage has been tolerated to retain the family name and contain widow and children within the family fold by marrying her to a bachelor brother of her husband."

Spread of modernizing cultural norms caused a major breakdown in the principles of hierarchy and holism. The new legal norms did not have inegalitarian standards that were based on distinction between one caste and another, one ethnic community and another. The new legal system along with other factors of change led to wiping out of hierarchical values and differential relations in the Hindu society, not only in theory but in actual practice. Thus, the new legal system based on the principles of universalism, rationalism and individualism, emphasizing humanistic values, became an instrument of modernization in Mauritius.

EDUCATION AND MODERNIZATION

In most countries, the contemporary education system that has become a major agent of change and modernization in several ways is of the western Origin. The system of modern education is fundamentally different in structure and orientation to any traditional system of transmitting knowledge. It is evolving with the persistently changing world and its content is liberal but steeped in modern scientific world-view. The modern education is merit based and achievement-oriented, therefore, not a prerogative of any group of the society. Singh (1986, p 101) believes that, "traditionally, education was imparted informally, its content was esoteric and metaphysical, its communication was limited and the structure of its organization was hereditary and closed."

Majority of Indian immigrants to Mauritius were not very privileged and not highly educated but were only literate. As Roy (1960, p 368) says, "although the bulk of the immigrants to Mauritius were not educated, but many of them were versed in the scriptures. From the moment of their landing, they began to unfold their cultural institutions." Religious gatherings were held regularly with the reading of the scriptures or epics and recitals of



hymns and songs. In the evenings vernacular schools were run for the Indo-Mauritians. Many schools are still conducting teaching in Indian languages. Most of these schools of Indo-Mauritians are evening schools, the children of these schools attend regular Government schools during the day.

Formal education began in Mauritius very early on, but was limited to certain sections of Mauritian society. Those Indians who acquired formal education and became professionals, according to Reddi (1989, p 3), “such professionals were politically active and were much preferred by the administration to represent Indians in the legislative council because of their western education and values.” Prominent educated professionals of Indo-Mauritian origin include Dr. H. Sakir, Dr. Nalletamby, E. Sandapa and Dr. Sinnatambou.

In Mauritius, the colonial period education system was highly anglicized and based on the British model. The medium of instruction was English and primary education was provided to the local population with little access to secondary education. Children who could not speak English were disadvantaged as primary medium of instruction was English. The uneven access to education, more opportunities to privileged classes and lesser to others, created more heterogeneity in the social groups.

Ramdoyal (1977, p 85-89) found that, “in 1871, there were only 829 Indian children attending school in a population of 39,100. While in 1908 only 7000 out of the population of 60,000 Indian children attended schools.” Indian merchants and labourers preferred vernacular education and for several decades most Indians remained untouched by the western education. “The minority who attended schools in the rural areas was the offsprings of sirdars, job contractors and small planters” according to Reddi (1989, p3). Children of the indentured labourers lacked eagerness for formal education as they were supporting their families in the plantation work to supplement the family income. Also, Indo-Mauritians feared that their children would become alienated from their own identity.

From education for few select to free and compulsory education for all is the story of education development in Mauritius. It was in 1856 that the Government stated Grant-in aid schools and it enlisted the support of voluntary organizations for the provision of education. In 1859 and 1865 there were 30 and 53 aided schools

respectively as reported by Teelock (2001 p.280). She further states that “in 1882 there were 47 Government schools and 57 Grant-in-aid schools (281).” The normal practice of Indian indentured labourers was that the whole family, including the children worked in the plantations. These small extra hands were not encouraged to go to schools. Therefore, the opening of schools was not the only and sufficient condition that would inspire the school-age children to attend the formal education catered in the schools.

Seeing the disinterest of the working-class parents to provide their children with education and the Government understanding the importance of education in modernizing Mauritius was pushed to amend labour laws. In 1908 the Labour laws were modified. People also began to be more receptive to education and of acquisition of English and French. The vernacular schools continued to exist informally through *baithakas* and *madrassas*. Around that time the economic condition of Indian labourers was improving, that created a favourable situation for Indians to send their children to schools. Later, its advantages were also acknowledged.

Even though education was structured to the needs of migrants, the emergence of first batch of western educated elite was considerably late. Reddi (1989) found that it was not until after the 1930's that professionals arose from the merchant class while among the laboring class, there were already two professionals in the 1920's. Mauritius' growing economy and the Empire's administrative needs, made the Government to recognize the establishment of educational system that was more inclusive, less anglicized and secular. It was not until 1944, that all Mauritian children were provided free primary education.

The Government was forced to introduce education for the children of Indian indentured labour as there were political threats and fear of social instability. Even Governor Higgins was ardent supporter of establishing free society through education. Due to all these factors, there were intensive efforts on the part of Government to put forth scheme of education catering to the needs of Indians in Mauritius. This scheme was referred to a Special Committee of Council. The Committee was of the view that the Indians should not be provided a special education and stressed that the education of Indians should be the same in kind and in the mode of



communication as that given to the children of various other races. The aim of providing such education was to gradually integrate and absorb the immigrants with the rest of the Mauritian society. The education so far was qualifying the youths of the working class for the lower rank jobs such as clerks or other secondary employment. Hence, then existing education was seen as dysfunctional for them.

After the general election of 1948 great emphasis was given to education by the Labour Party which gave a great impetus to increase the popular demand for education. Education was seen as an investment for the future of both the children and the parents, who would be guaranteed some security in their old age by their educated off-spring. In hope for safeguarding their futures, parents went through all sorts of personal sacrifices. Education was seen as the symbol of a new status, As Ramgoolam (1982, p 166) says an “instrument of class appropriation”. He further states that education “conferred on the educated classes social importance as elite, accorded social mobility and facilitated entry into bourgeois society... Demand for education was so great that by the sixties the literacy rate rose beyond 90%.” Education was essential for progress and for breaking from the colonial past. Ramgoolam firmly believed that education was the key to modernization and was seen to be means of redistribution of wealth. In his views “education broke old rigid occupational roles which had confined the Indians to agricultural fields.”

The Colonial government took a lot of initiative to open more schools so that education could be within the reach of schools age children. It brought within its fold many children. Moheeputh (1984, p 317) found that, “American magazine ‘Awake’ (New York) on July 22, 1954 commented, - From backwardness to enlightenment from mass illiteracy to a feverish demand of education, and all this in just ten year – that is Mauritius! There is a tremendous desire for knowledge.” Thus, education came to be seen as a means of moral and social advancement and an instrument of their progress. Kalla (1984, p 182, n.17) notes that, “socialization intent of education was stressed and knowledge was believed to be the surest guarantee of social order at a time when Indians formed more than half of the total population.”

Till 1956, there were no free public, primary or secondary schools for indentured immigrants. Teelock

(2001) states that only 10% of Indo-Mauritian children could only get formal education by 1900 and the main reasons for this low numbers were “the multiplicity of languages, ignorance of the English language, the transitory residence of Indians and their distribution in some 225 estates and their apprehension of proselytism (281).” Governor Phayre came to Mauritius in 1874 and believed in educating the children of the Indian labouring class to bring about the rise in working class, for that Kalla (1984, P 199) is of the view that the Governor introduced the education that was less religious but more pragmatic. Even the perception of Indians of education in Mauritius changed by the end of the 19th century – one from that of proselytization to that catering to the needs of the Indian labour.

There was a paradigm shift in the new education system as it was different in its organizational structure. Achievement than ascriptive criteria became more important for the appointment of teachers. The new system required professionals and to be imparted by teachers who were appointed based on educational achievement irrespective of their caste or birth. Not only was the content of the education but also the structure of the teaching profession was thus secularized. Merit-based appointment provided equal opportunities to people of all caste groups, thereby, weakening the caste rigidities.

Enlightened Indians accepted education to emancipate the Indian labour from their miserable condition in Mauritius. The Bisoodoyal brothers (Basdeo, Sugriva and Sookdeo) took the lead to promote the formal education. Moheeputh (1984, p94) writes that, “Basdeo Bisoodoyal turned his house into a training school and hundreds of teachers were trained.” Soon *baithakas* in the Island began to be become centres of social, religious, cultural and educational activities. Trained volunteers were encouraged to impart education free of charge and remove illiteracy as a first step to attain freedom.

Post colonial education

The purpose of the education with which Mauritius introduced the education system was to modernize Mauritius by addressing the specific need of the different ethnic groups. According to Singh (1986 p.103) “the significance of education in modernization could be analysed in three areas: first, the cultural content of the education, secondly, its organizational structure and



thirdly, the rate of its growth.” By this parameter, the content of new education was indisputably modernizing and liberal in nature. An important element in this education was emphasis on contemporary and humanistic evaluation of social, political and historical issues. The curricula had a subtle orientation to focus the attention on social and physical realities. This marked a major break from the traditional outlook and system of values. “Science education is often associated more positively with the modernization effects than Arts, because this education creates manpower which is indispensable for economic and industrial growth (*Ibid.* p. 103)

When Mauritius got independence, its economy was monocrop economy with little diversification. Education system was hardly vocational or skill- based. After independence, the 1971-75 National Plan stressed the need to change the education’s very academic nature to a more vocational role and to train people to meet economic development objectives.⁵⁶ this led to very high rate of growth of education. The educational progress can be measured in terms of the number of schools and students attending educational institutions. *Digest of Education Statistics* (1998) reports that “in 1998, in primary education, there were a total of 285 schools, 13 of which were in Rodrigues. Of these 222 were Government Schools; 51 run by Roman Catholic Education Authority, 2 by the Hindu Education Authority and 10 were private unaided schools.⁵⁷ There were some 130,505 pupils enrolled, 51% were boys and 49% girls... There were 5,065 teachers in all.”

According to the data of *Digest of Education Statistics* (1998) “for secondary education there were 133 schools, only 31 were Government schools, 102 were professional, private and non-aided institutions. There were about 4,820 teachers.” “In 1998, 14,438 students appeared for schools certificate examinations, 6,128 took part in Higher School Certificate and there were also 34 vocational schools training some 4,641 students.”

Free and universal education revolutionized the society. Its impact was felt in all the fields: social, economic and political. In training educated manpower to serve public administrations, business and industry, education is playing an important role. This has furthered the economic development of the country. Educated citizens have helped to raise the standards of living of the society

at large. They have set examples for groups of society: the home, the neighborhood, clubs, and the village community. They became a role model. Their contribution to political development is also enormous. They constitute an informed and critical electorate, very crucial for a democratic society.

Education still is one of the most influential instruments of modernization in Mauritius. It has led to the mobilization and realization of people’s aspiration for nationalism and freedom. Singh (1964) is of the view that education results in the growth of an enlightened intelligentsia which carries forward struggle for social and cultural reforms. It resulted in the formation of a sub-culture of people who are neither fully modern nor totally tradition bound. They contain elements of transition from tradition to modernity. The educational system has contributed to modernization of the county. It resulted in the creation of new forms of structures such as schools, colleges and universities, which imparts knowledge that is modern in ethos under the overarching cultural specificity. Modernization has in some forms been welcomed but there is a conscious effort to preserve the traditional values.

Modernization process has led to radical transformation in the caste structure that took root in Mauritius. The developmental strategies adopted have envisaged modernization for all levels of society and all ethnic groups of the country. Introduction of adult suffrage and a federal parliamentary form of society. Introduction of adult suffrage and a federal parliamentary form of political structure have carried politicization to every sector of social organization. Caste elements developed new functional adaptations and activated aspirations created by democratization of polity and power structures. In Mauritian Indian society, the new middle classes seemed to have emerged simultaneously in response to changes in the spheres of political and social institutions.

The modernization processes altered the traditional hereditary nature of caste occupations significantly. The association between caste calling and the occupation broke. Modern occupations dissociated the caste-occupation association. Education provided opportunities to acquire new occupations. Occupational mobility increased affecting the socio-economic position of all castes. In the industrial town in Mauritius, new



occupations have emerged which either do not fit into the traditional caste hierarchy or the employers set aside caste considerations in hiring people or the employees set aside their caste affiliation while taking on occupations. This gave a big blow to the already fragmented caste structure.

Conclusion:

As soon as Indians left the Indian shore for Mauritius, the change began then. Their travelling brought them in contact with people of different castes and different communities. This started to create a precondition for accepting more changes that were to come. The rigidity of the caste system got a big jolt with weakening of the notions of purity and pollution. One of the major change agents was western model of education introduced by the British in the 19th and 20th century. Initially it was restricted to few but later in 1950s education became free for all. There was a complete lack of political rights for the Indians till 1815 when fully non-representative Council of Government came into existence. Constitutional change of 1885 gave people right to vote but limited to only those with high property and educational qualifications. Most Indians were debarred because of lack of knowledge of English. The new constitution of 1947 was a landmark decision in the history of the Constitution of Mauritius that gave voting rights to the coloured. The franchise extended to women, both for the right to vote and to be voted that provided equality to women and complete citizenship rights. But universal suffrage was granted in 1959. It enabled good governance and sustain democratic ethos. Exposure to these change agents led to the creation of a new political culture and a sense of nationalism. The political participation and share in decision making process is a big status equaliser. Introduction of standardised legal system provided an opportunity for the protecting individual rights and freedom. The universal suffrage and standardised legal system introduced the concepts of equality and justice. Then the modern education made known the scientific world view.

Education, universal suffrage and standardised legal system were harbinger of modernization and consequent enlightenment. Social change became very evident. These factors aided significant transformation in the form of caste structure that was existing in Indian Mauritian community in the twentieth century. The caste

distinctions and hierarchical imagery of caste structure began to erode in the secular sphere. The rigidity of castes considerations weakened and underwent transformation that led to structural changes in the “institutions of family, caste and marriage” in Mauritius. Cultural norms and practices got modified in the changing political and social environment. It provided Indians in Mauritius an opportunity to unite, undermining the hierarchical arrangement of castes and horizontal divisions within castes.

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