



E-ISSN: 2706-9117  
P-ISSN: 2706-9109  
[www.historyjournal.net](http://www.historyjournal.net)  
IJH 2021; 3(1): 80-83  
Received: 11-01-2021  
Accepted: 15-03-2021

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## **Labourers to leaders: Emergence of political consciousness in Indian diaspora in Mauritius during colonial period**

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to trace the genesis of political consciousness and their emergence as a dominant diasporic community within the regime of colonial empire which eventually led the independence of Mauritius and remained the foremost political power since then. This paper argues Indians in Mauritius rearticulated and renegotiated their cultural ethnic differences in order to put a collective front in order to achieve their political ascendancy.

**Keywords:** Indian diaspora, Mauritius, identities, cultural diversity, political conscious

### **Introduction**

The genesis of political consciousness among the Indian labour Diaspora in Mauritius was the culmination of the process of collective resistance which began with the attempts to voice their grievances in a collective manner in the pre-Royal Commission period. In period beginning with the 1870s, the growing economic and numeric presence of Indians in Mauritian socio-economic realm instilled a sense of self-assurance and more importantly a very critical collective consciousness among the immigrant population. Making an affirmative departure from the earlier feelings of anguish and despair, the diasporic community could progressively see a ray of hope at the end of tunnel and began to 'perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as limiting situation which they can transform' <sup>[1]</sup>. This crucial perception of reality was manifested through the political consciousness of the labour Diaspora which initially aimed at getting redress from the oppressive institutions of the plantation regime and in later years graduated to making demands for participation in the institutions of governance and for an equitable share in the political space.

The representative form of governance was introduced in Mauritius for the first time by Governor John Pope Hennessey through the Constitution of 1885, implemented in 1886. Under the new constitution, the Council of Government was constituted of eight officials, nine nominated members and ten members who were to be elected by a popular vote. But the qualifications for the franchise rights were so restrictive that only few thousand 'whites' and some coloured population could get the right to vote. For 1886 elections, only 6000 or less than 2 per cent people had voting rights, from among a total population of about 360,000. The representation of Indian immigrants was extremely low – only 300 Indian immigrants got the franchise rights despite their being 69 per cent of the total population, and many of these were actually the traders and not the descendents of the indentured labourers <sup>[2]</sup>.

Making property the essential qualification for voting rights, the traditional dominant classes like white planters and bureaucracy saw a possible threat to their uncontested hegemony from the Indian small planters who had acquired significant landed property by then. Brushing aside these apprehensions of the plantation elites, Governor Hennessey assured them by making a note of the political apathy among the Indian immigrants, 'Indians were not politically minded, they were too sensible to be politicians and neither they nor the Chinese would ever cause any trouble' <sup>[3]</sup>. However, Indian immigrants did not voluntarily opt out of politics but they were denied participation in the political process through discrimination. The massive political participation by Indian immigrants in post 1930s period outrightly refuted the Governor's reading of their alleged political apathy.

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There was deliberate discrimination against the Indian Diaspora in granting the franchise rights to its members. Owing to the morcellement process in 1870s, many of the immigrants had acquired the property required for getting the voting rights but they were debarred through indirect method of discrimination – they were asked to sign the form in English. This became a major barrier for large numbers of Indian land owners and therefore they were debarred from getting the right to vote. The Constitution of 1886 had strong racial bias against Indian Diaspora and it included every possible legal barrier to prevent Indians from getting into the electoral system, yet it had landmark significance for the political participation of Indians as it opened up the possibilities of their entry into the political system.

An Indian immigrant was also nominated by Governor Hennessey to the newly constituted representative Council. Gnanadicarayan, who was nominated to the Council, was not a descendent of indentured labourers, but his ancestors came as traders during the French period <sup>[4]</sup>. He refused to identify with the indentured labourers and therefore his appointment could not be hailed as a triumph for immigrant Indian labourers. The political awakening among the Indian labour Diaspora and the levels of their participation in the political process of the island did not change much till the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century when concerted efforts were initiated by the educated sections of Indian Diaspora for greater levels of participation in the political process and for significant political space.

In 1901, Mohanlal Karamchand Gandhi, who later rose to lead the anti-colonial mass movement in India and was accorded the towering status as Mahatma Gandhi by the Indian people, came to Mauritius en route from South Africa to India. Mahatma Gandhi landed at Port Louis on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1901 and left on 19<sup>th</sup> November <sup>[5]</sup>. At that time, Mahatma Gandhi was fighting against the racial discrimination against the Indian immigrants in South Africa and the disabilities imposed upon them by the colonial government. During his brief stay in Mauritius, he also stayed with Charles Bruce, the Governor of the colony. Mahatma Gandhi went around in the Indian localities with a purpose to acquaint himself with the conditions of Indians in that colony <sup>[6]</sup>. The Indian Diaspora, which had followed the work of Mahatma Gandhi for Indians in South Africa, was elated upon his arrival and reception committee was set up with a leading Indian businessman Hajee Goolam Hossen as its head. He was given receptions by the Indian community <sup>[7]</sup> and a huge public meeting was organised for him in Port Louis <sup>[8]</sup>. Although Mahatma Gandhi had not recorded much about his stay in his writings, he was certainly perturbed by the deplorable condition of the Indian immigrants, the enormous disabilities imposed upon them by the colonial rule and complete lack of civil and political rights for the entire community. Addressing the public meeting of Indian immigrants, he underlined the contributions of the Indian community to the prosperity of Mauritius and expressed his concerns over the disabilities imposed upon them despite their vital role in the economy of the island. He suggested the Indian community to pose a collective struggle for their rights and honourable space in the socio-economic and political realm and to make this struggle successful, he urged the Indian diasporic community to bridge their differences and form a collective identity, educate their children because emancipation comes through education and more active participation in the political processes. He

also asked them to maintain contact with the motherland <sup>[9]</sup>. Despite its short duration, Mahatma Gandhi's visit had profound symbolic impact upon the Indian Diaspora in Mauritius and his call for a larger political participation worked as a great stimulus to the process of their political awakening <sup>[10]</sup>. In 1901 itself, two Indians - Ajam Bigrajee and H. Sakir were elected as Councillors <sup>[11]</sup>.

At the same time a sense of mistrust and anxiety about the Franco-Mauritians' loyalty began to erupt in the British administrative circles, which worked in favour of the political aspirations of the Indian community in Mauritius. To counter the overarching French dominance, the British officials decided to give more political and administrative representation to the Indians whom they found to be more loyal. Secretary of State suggested the Governor to increase the influence of the Indian community,

'In view of the generally accepted fact that the French inhabitants of Mauritius must be regarded as less loyal than the Indian inhabitants, I am of opinion that it may be desirable that steps should be taken to increase the power and influence of the Indian community & to lessen that of the French who though few in numbers have hitherto been dominant in affairs' <sup>[12]</sup>.

Following this policy of promoting the influence of Indian Diaspora, several of them were nominated to different representative bodies of the Government. Dr. Marius Francis Xavier Nalletamby, an England trained Christian doctor, was nominated to the Council <sup>[13]</sup>, another Muslim merchant Mahmoud Atchia, who later played a very prominent role in Mauritian politics, was nominated to the Municipal Board of Rose Hill and Beau Bassin. Due to this administrative turn about and the increased political consciousness among Indian immigrants enthused by Mahatma Gandhi's suggestions, the number of Indians with voting rights increased from 300 in 1886 to 1400 in the 1906 elections, out of a total of 7800 voters <sup>[14]</sup>. Raj Mathur ascribes this increase in the number of Indian voters to the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and the encouragement of the Franco-Mauritians <sup>[15]</sup>. However, a careful analysis of the correspondence between the Governor of Mauritius and the Colonial Office makes it clear that the first initiatives to increase the number of Indian voters came from the British officials as a counterbalance to the French dominance. While defending Governor Bruce's attempts to introduce Indians in the institutions of governance, the Secretary of State Joseph Chamberlain noted in 1901,

'The Indians are I think in a majority of the population & it is most desirable that their interested. Be represented. I will face the storm. When it has settled down we shall be stronger in Mauritius than we have ever been & the French oligarchy will be kept in order by the other races <sup>[16]</sup>.'

It was only around the elections of 1906 that the Franco-Mauritian class, which had been at the helm of racist discrimination against the Indian immigrants, began to realise the vital importance of the numeric strength of these 'filthy' colliers in maintaining their dominance in representative institutions of governance and thus in a struggle for hegemony, they also advocated an increase in the number of Indian voters who, as the Franco-Mauritian elite perceived, would support them in the electoral battles. However, in these attempts to lure the Indian community, neither the British officials nor the Franco-Mauritians were concerned with the across the board representation for the Indians in the political system and focused only towards a

selected few who had acquired wealth or high levels of education.

The much needed concerted direction and leadership to the naïve struggle of the Indian diasporic community for political space in Mauritius was provided by Manilal Maganlal Doctor who arrived in Mauritius on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1907 <sup>[17]</sup>. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Manilal Doctor also represented the newly emerging stream of nationalist youth from India – awakened, educated and with a deep sense of national self-respect and their political - civic rights. Manilal Doctor was a member of Gokhale's Servants of India Society and was deeply influenced by the ideas of Gandhi and Gokhale. Gandhi met Manilal in London in 1906 and motivated him to go to Mauritius to practice law and work for the cause of Indians in Mauritius. After his arrival, Manilal registered at the bar in Mauritius to practice law, and started taking up cases of not so resourceful immigrants. It was during these cases that Manilal discovered the discrimination and oppressive humiliation of Indians especially the harsh punishment for negligible offences. He also found that Indian immigrant community was constantly demoralised and it had no access even to very essential civilian rights. Manilal started mobilizing Indians to take the legal route to fight against their oppression but soon realized that this could not be achieved unless there was a general awakening among the Indian immigrants for their rights and self-respect. And therefore he decided to instigate the self-respect in the Indian community,

'If the Mauritian Indians, being poor in the beginning, have allowed themselves to be demoralised in certain ways for want of moral courage or proper example, it is high time now that they should be inspired with due respect for their home traditions exact a just respect for the same from their neighbours of non-Indian origin <sup>[18]</sup>.'

With this began his crusade against the discriminations and disabilities of Indian Diaspora in Mauritius and efforts to build political consciousness among them. In order to reach the wider sections of the Mauritian society and to give a voice to the concerns and grievances of the immigrant community, he started a weekly journal *Hindushtani* in English-Gujarati and later in English-Hindi. The first issue came out on 15 March 1909. The masthead of the journal carried the motto - 'Liberty of Individuals! Fraternity of Men!! Equality of Races!!! <sup>[19]</sup> which asserted the main focus of Manilal's struggle – discontinuation of all discrimination and equal status to the Indian Diaspora. Following the very Gandhian strategy, Manilal also believed in the proper representation of problems before the authorities. He represented himself and mobilized many others to depose before the Royal Commission of 1909. He demanded that,

'an enquiry be made into the conditions of Indian labourers, many of whom are dead or starving in the streets of Port Louis, and into the story of their being induced by false pretences to come from India, and into their present helpless position after the completion of indenture <sup>[20]</sup>.'

Apart from demands for improvement in the working conditions of immigrant labourers, Manilal also demanded their representation in the political system of the colony and worked closely with 'Action Libearle', a political formation of the Creole population of Mauritius. Manilal's efforts were not approved by the colonial authorities. The Governor feared that Manilal had become the unofficial political advisor to the Indian immigrants and 'may become the

cause of disturbance and create a regrettable race agitation <sup>[21]</sup>.' They found that Manilal had 'mischievous effect' on Indians and to fetter his attempts to the political mobilisation of Indian immigrants and demands for extended representation in political system, colonial authorities decided to delegitimise Manilal's efforts. As the Acting Governor Smith indicated,

'Our policy must be I think to discredit Manilal Doctor and his party as much as possible in the eyes of the Indians and induce the latter to recognise the Nominee Members as their properly constituted representatives <sup>[22]</sup>.'

Manilal's attempts to mobilise Indian immigrants was condemned not only by the colonial authorities but also by the political representatives of the Indian community like Dr. Nalletamby, who were hand-picked by the authorities.

Apart from the demands for general representation, on occasions immigrants demanded for the nomination of a particular candidate in the council. In a petition signed by 142 Indian immigrants, petitioners demanded the permanent nomination to the Council, of K. Narainsamy, a shipping agent, who was appointed by the authorities as a substitute for another White member of the Council <sup>[23]</sup>. At times even individuals demanded their nomination in the Council. In one such case, Rustomjee Mervanjee Mehta, a Parsee merchant from Port Louis, submitted a petition to the King George V, urging his nomination in the Council on the grounds that he was the only member of the Parsee community with so much success and thus deserved a seat <sup>[24]</sup>.

Manilal Doctor finally left Mauritius in September 1911, but he had already instilled self-respect and consciousness of their rights among the Indian Diaspora which continued to wage a struggle against oppression and demands for equitable status. The first major triumph of the process of political awakening which Manilal inspired was achieved in 1921, after a prolonged struggle of ten years, when two descendants of the indentured labourers – R. Gujadhur and Dunpath Lallah were elected to the council. This paved the way for the establishment of the political ascendancy of Indian diaspora in Mauritius.

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7. As recorded in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Vol. II), he was given one reception by the Indian Community in Mauritius which has been refuted by a prominent leader of Indian community and educationist of 1940s and 50s, Basdeo Bissoondoyal who complains that little attention has been given to Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Mauritius by the editors of *Collected Works* and claims that Mahatma was

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