

The Mauritian Diaspora

The Mauritian Government wants to enlist
the support of Overseas Mauritians

The questions being asked are
(i) When did the Mauritian Diaspora start,
(ii) What is the size of the Mauritian Diaspora and
(iii) Up to what generation does the Mauritian Diaspora extend?

In this No 86 issue of the Mauritian Overseas Gazette, our contributor, Suresh B. Coonjeebeeharry, tries to understand the questions and to interpret the dimension of the Mauritian population overseas.

There has been of late quite a bit of talk about granting to the Mauritian diaspora the right to vote in general elections held in Mauritius in the same way that overseas Indians are allowed to vote in elections held in India, and overseas French nationals are allowed to vote in elections held in France.

With the millions of voters in India, few thousands of overseas voters do not in any way affect the home scrutin. The same may be said of France and other countries.

What of Mauritius? The important question to be asked is how many of that sizeable Mauritian population who have emigrated to the UK, France, Australia, Canada, Belgium, etc, will have the right to vote in elections held in Mauritius.

In fact, Mauritian migrants are allowed to hold dual nationality and many may therefore register to vote in Mauritian elections, if the law is amended to allow them to do so. It may be worth mentioning that Dual nationality was a right fought for and obtained by PMSD leader Xavier not too long ago.

Having spent quite a bit of his life in the UK, Xavier Duval should know the importance of dual citizenship which is now being extended to the offspring of all overseas Mauritians. Will the right to vote in Mauritius be extended to all generations of Mauritians living abroad and who have obtained the Mauritian citizenship?

Or will a line be drawn between Mauritians who were born in Mauritius and the new Mauritians? It is said that PM Navin Ramgoolam has set up a committee to study all the implications for the extension of the right to vote to overseas Mauritians in general. The amount of work for that committee will be enormous.

O A P

Apart from voting right, the dual nationality allows overseas Mauritians to benefit from the old age pension scheme (now universal pension) in Mauritius, provided they reside for a period of six months in Mauritius within every calendar year even though they have never worked in Mauritius and have never paid any income tax in the country.

So, there is a bit of *va-et-vient* between the country of adoption and the home island. The OAP, which is non-contributory in Mauritius is now payable from the age of 65. In France and the UK, the retirement pension is contributory. In France the retirement pension is payable from the age of 62, and the UK from the age of 66.

What is the Size of the Mauritian Diaspora?

With the grant of the Mauritian citizenship to every person *de souche mauricienne*, could a point be reached when there could be more voters outside Mauritius than in Mauritius itself?

Let us do a bit of simple arithmetic. In the 1960s, in the wake of the independence of Mauritius, the British government was worried about the future of its Indian Ocean colony with an explosive birth rate and which depended entirely on its sugar production.

The British Government sent, separately, experts from the London School of Economics (LSE), Professor James Meade, Professor Abel Smith and Professor Titmus to carry out economic and social survey of the island and to make recommendations of how an independent Mauritius could sustain itself.

From the internet, we read "The Economic and Social Structure of Mauritius by James Meade: This Report was published subsequent to his visit and his evaluation in the early 1960s . This influential work painted a pessimistic "Malthusian" picture of Mauritius's future due to high population growth and dependence on a single crop (sugar), which prompted significant policy discussions and eventual economic diversification strategies."

He forecasted that the population of Mauritius would reach around the 3 million mark by the turn of the century, i.e.by the beginning of the year 2000 (then some 40 years away).

Recommendations

The LSE gentlemen made a few recommendations tor poverty-stricken Mauritius to cope. Among their recommendations, of one of them was

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the introduction of a form of family planning in order to keep the population growth down. Mauritians should have fewer children.

Some religious people in the country went mad with anger, accusing the Labour Government of the day, of intending to introduce birth control legislation in Mauritius. Chief Minister Dr Seewoosagur Ramgoolam (not knighted yet) was accused of supporting the LSE report.

Dr Ramgoolam denied having such intention and to appease the population, he did something extraordinary. He introduced legislation to grant a monthly allowance of Rs20 to families with 3 children and more. In a way, he was encouraging Mauritians to have more children, which was quite the opposite to the birth control concept. This of course stopped the personal attack on Dr Ramgoolam, Senior.

But what did the family allowance prove? It proved that there was no official attempt to control population growth in Mauritius. The birth rate in the country still remained at the time one of the highest of the world. At that rate, the population was expected to reach 3 million by the year 2000.

Emigration

The report did also recommend emigration as a way to assuage the overpopulation burden of Mauritius. But emigration - not to England or Europe or to Australia or Canada, but to Brazil because of our sugar-cane culture. Of course, Dr Ramgoolam would have none of that nonsense.

So, family planning did not work, emigration to Brazil did not take place. The population growth rate therefore could not come down as desired. Yet, NOW, in the year 2025 the population is estimated to be around 1.2m when it was forecasted to be over 3m by now. In all logic, the question may be asked where are the missing two million (plus) compatriots who were expected to be around after new Millenium. And where are the children of their children born thereafter?

In the 1960s, Mauritius was a much poorer than today. Unemployment was rife. The Mauritius government could not afford an official policy to pay the fare of Mauritians to emigrate to other climes. Mauritians by themselves decided to migrate during the period before independence especially as politicians heading the campaign against independence instilled in the mind of the population the fear of the *Hégémonie Hindoue*. (Indian domination).

Hégémonie Hindoue

The politicians campaigning against Independence of Mauritius told the population that after independence, as a result of the Hindu domination, all male Mauritians would have to wear the dhoti (*langouti*),

The politicians told the population that Port Louis harbour would be full of ships bringing *langoutis* from India. The population was warned that after independence the Statue of the Virgin Mary (Marie Reine de la Paix) on the Boulevard Edward VII at the foot of the Signal Mountain would be replaced by the Statue of Mahatma Gandhi. Such denigrate campaign incited the non-Hindus to become bitter, which brought about the race riot of 1965 in the wake of independence. The British had to send military troops to Mauritius to restore order in the island.

Thus, Mauritians fearing for their future and for that of their families left the country by the thousands, weeks after weeks, to emigrate namely to the UK, France, Belgium, Australia and Canada. Those who lived in Mauritius at the time can remember the thousands of compatriots sailing away on the Messageries Maritimes to Europe and Patris to Australia. These compatriots sold their properties for bread and butter only to be able to pay the fares to sail away.

Those families who fled in the 1960s, 65 years ago, their children and the children of their children are now part of the Mauritian diaspora that

Mauritius has to reckon with.

Brain Drain

People talk of brain drain as if this is a new phenomenon as far as Mauritius is concerned. As an insular nation, Mauritians have always dreamed of going away to other horizons. One day, Gaetan Duval, leader of the Parti Mauricien, said “On s’étouffe à Maurice.”

This has been the feeling shared by many compatriots of the old days. In the 1930s, many former colons left to settle in South Africa, France and even in the UK.

In the 1940s, thousands of Mauritians enrolled in the British army to fight for the mother country. After the war, many soldiers preferred to be demobbed in the UK rather than coming back to face unemployment and poverty in Mauritius.

As a British colony, only diplomas and degrees from British institutions were accepted in Mauritius. Many young Mauritians who went to study outside England did not come back as they would not obtain employment in Mauritius. Most Scholarship beneficiaries preferred to stay in the UK or to move to the States etc. Even to this day, in 2025, Mauritius is facing a similar situation where scholarship beneficiaries do not return to serve the country. These also constitute the roots of the Mauritian diaspora.

The Nursing era

It came a time when young english nationals shunned the nursing profession in the UK. The hospitals experienced a shortage of nurses. The British Government was compelled to recruit young people from the Commonwealth to come to the UK to enrol as nursing students.

A special arrangement was put in place by the British Government to bring college leavers from the West Indies to join the nursing profession in England. These recruits’ airfare was paid by the British Government. This facility was not extended to the other colonies but the British hospitals were willing to accept students from any country who came on their own arrangement.

Thousands of Young Mauritians keen to add to our island’s brain drain factor left Mauritius by themselves to go and try their luck for nurse recruitment. Once in post, they recommended their friends who were still in Mauritius and they too join the cohort of migrants.

The local Labour Department created a special section to recommend and place young Mauritians in UK hospitals. Once I visited a hospital in Surrey, South East England, where I met 12 Mauritian nurses on duty in that one single hospital. There were others who were off-duty. There was a time that all UK hospitals, even in the most far-off Rural areas, had Mauritian nursing staff among their personnel. Some of them later become tutors and even hospital administrators.

The cohabitation of the nursing personnel was fertile ground for the former country boys from Mauritius to take advantage of the girls, especially non-Mauritian ones. Matrons had a hard time to discipline those Mauritian boys who took advantage of the proximities in wards. So, more little Mauritians inflated the diaspora quantum.

Again, it is worth mentioning that was taking place over sixty years ago. Those young emigrants from Mauritius are now retired stay-at-home granddads minding the children of their children. This is part of the Mauritian diaspora. The three generations of them all have a right to dual nationality and will vote in Mauritian general elections, if given a chance to do so.

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BOAC helped Mauritian Migration

In the 1960s, it was cheaper to travel by ship to Europe than by air. However, incredible, to reach Calais in France on the Messageries Maritimes vessel, it took between 28 and 32 days, going up via the coasts of East Africa (Tanzania, Kenya) through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean with stop-overs at various ports on the way. With accommodation and good food for a month or so, the fare was cheaper than travelling by air from Mauritius to the UK on an overnight flight. This sounds unbelievable, but it was so.

The one-way air ticket from Mauritius to London in those days cost £120 while sea journey was about £80. Many parents went into debts on behalf of their offspring to meet the cost of the sea trip. The BOAC {British Overseas Airways Corporation (Now British Airways – BA)} came with the bright idea to offer credit to the young Mauritians leaving Mauritius by the thousands.

Provided the young traveller could get himself a sponsor/guarantor he could pay the fare of £120 over a period of 12 months at the rate £10 a month. This was a fantastic proposition to be sure. Once in England, the young chap could get himself enrolled as a nurse student or obtain a factory job to repay £10 a month to BOAC.

One must have seen the new Mauritian migrants in England then. Up to six of them (or more) occupying one single room on the higher floor of the rented property. The landlord (on the ground floor) had a hard time checking their comings and goings.

It was all the more difficult as some would do night job. There was a situation where those working at night would come and sleep during the day, while those working during the day would occupy the room at night. Those hard workers soon bought their own houses and even a string of nursing homes. Millionaires, some of them, are investing in properties in Mauritius. They are the sort of elements of the Mauritian diaspora that the Mauritius Government wants to attract.

Charter flights

Muritians, learning from other immigrants, grouped themselves into various voluntary associations or charities and applied to the Mauritius government for special landing permit to charter planes to go home on holiday.

The charter flights, which cost much cheaper in fare than the regular flights, took members of the associations/charities from the UK to Mauritius for a month’s holiday. The same plane, on its return to base, took Mauritian citizens from the island to spend a month’s holiday in the UK,

A month later the Chartered plane, based in England, was supposed to take back to Mauritius those it brought to the UK for a holiday four weeks earlier. But during those four weeks, most of those Mauritians had disappeared into the décor in the UK and were nowhere to be seen. They increase the number of illegal Mauritian immigrants in the UK.

To the great distress of the regular airlines operating on the Mauritius route, several UK Mauritian associations were being authorised to op-

erate charter flights to Mauritius week after week. On each flight at least half of Mauritian holiday-makers were staying behind in the UK. The charter flight era lasted for some two to three years, The voluntary associations/charities had to make a fixed donation to a Students Fund run by the Mauritian Prime Minister’s office.

At some time, the Mauritian Prime Minister Ramgoolam, was able to make a donation of £10,000 to the University of Dublin from that students fund. But, it must be said again, the charter flight era helped to increase the size of the Mauritian diaspora in the UK in spite of the Commonwealth Immigrant Act of 1962 to control the number of immigrants. But because the illegal immigrants soon integrated the British society, government after government in Britain found it more expedient to regularise their stay in the UK, because they were providing the manpower that the country needed.

Yes, some 60 years after the mass migration of the 1960s, there is now talk within the Mauritian government to cream off some elements of the diaspora and to encourage them to come home to invest in businesses, or to bring their expertise in various fields to help in the development of Mauritius.

How does the Government propose to achieve this feat? First, the Government proposes to grant the Mauritian nationality to all members of the diaspora, and secondly, consider the possibility of granting to all of them the right to vote in general elections in Mauritius.

Regarding the first option, most Mauritian migrants are already taking advantage of this policy. But the second option to extend to all of them the right to vote in general elections may be a little bit more tricky to implement. So, the present Government has set up a committee to study all its implications.

Implications of Overseas Vote

Reports of the occurrence of election frauds have of recent years been a new phenomenon in Mauritius. There have been accusations of ballot rigging at every election. Ballot papers of one constituency have been recovered at the Vote Counting Station of a totally different constituency. At the November 2024 General Election, One Curepipe candidate, now a government minister, told the press that he spent the night following polling at a Vote Counting Station to watch over the ballot boxes, brought there, to ensure that no one came from any party to tamper with them.

Overseas Polling for expatriates will inevitably take place at the offices of Mauritius Embassies and of the Mauritius High Commissions in foreign countries. How secure can the ballot be at these missions? If in spite of all the police security arrangements in place in Mauritius, rigging can take place, how can one be certain that no vote tamper will take place at those missions.? The committee set up by the PM will have to provide answers to that.

However, the purpose of this article is to assess if a situation could arise when there could be more overseas voters than local ones in regard to any general election held in Mauritius.

Suresh B. Coonjeebeeharry

Mauritius Pushes New “Diaspora Engagement Strategy”

Have you heard of the Mauritius Diaspora Engagement Strategy? This scheme offers incentives to professionals, entrepreneurs and investors living abroad to invest, mentor start-ups, and return for short-term or permanent placements. Incentives can include fast-tracked residency permits and tax exemptions. Officials say the plan seeks to “connect the Mauritian mind and capital abroad with opportunities at home”. The scheme may benefit skilled professionals or retirees seeking to contribute to Mauritius without uprooting entirely. Find out more: Diaspora for Development Brief (https://diasporafordevelopment.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CF_Mauritius.pdf)

Mauritius Financial Strategy Invites Diaspora Expertise

Mauritius’ government and private-sector partners have launched a five-year strategy to grow its financial services hub, following a report by the Ministry of Financial Services and Economic Planning. The plan aims to redefine the nation’s financial services industry, eventually positioning Mauritius as the leading International Financial Centre (IFC) for Africa and Asia, anchored by sustainability, technology and excellence. Finance and fintech professionals in the diaspora may have the opportunity to engage with Mauritius’ evolving financial ecosystem — either through consultancy work, remote projects, etc. Further details: Sovereign Group Financial Strategy Summary (<https://www.sovereign-group.com/news/mauritius-unveils-ambitious-five-year-strategy-for-financial-services-sector/>)