

## **BEYOND THE HORIZON: STORIES OF MAURITIUS' SUGAR ESTATE DWELLERS**

**Dr. Leena Ramnarain**

Royal Road Koyratty Pamplémousses, Mauritius

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### **Abstract**

Mauritius, an idyllic island nestled in the South West Indian Ocean, is a unique case in the annals of immigration history. It lacks a native population, with all its inhabitants tracing their roots to various waves of immigration spanning centuries. This paper delves into the historical narratives that have shaped Mauritius' multicultural landscape.

The island's history is characterized by three significant waves of immigration – Dutch, French, and British. Notably, the British colonial era was pivotal in shaping the demographic composition of the island. With the advent of sugarcane as a highly profitable industry, the demand for labor surged. Slavery had been abolished in 1835, prompting the British authorities to seek alternative sources of labor. This need led to the recruitment of indentured laborers from India, primarily hailing from North India, to support the burgeoning sugarcane industry. These indentured laborers, in accordance with the terms of their contracts, received essential amenities like a standard of living, wages, ration, housing, and medical care.

This paper specifically focuses on the Great Experiment initiated by the British Imperial Government, which involved the recruitment of indentured laborers to work in Mauritius. The indentured laborers, coming from India, marked the beginning of a new chapter in the island's history. The Hunter-Arbutnot and Company holds the distinction of bringing the first batch of these immigrants to Mauritius on the ship *Atlas*, on November 4, 1834. These individuals were subsequently sent to the remote village of Antoinette Phooliar, situated in Belle Alliance, within the Riviere du Rempart district. In Antoinette Phooliar, they worked side by side with a cadre of two hundred slaves in the sugarcane fields, laying the foundation for the island's economic transformation.

This historical exploration of immigration in Mauritius sheds light on the island's unique social fabric, influenced by waves of immigrants who arrived under varying circumstances. By examining the shifts in immigration patterns and labor systems, this research contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the multicultural dynamics that have evolved over the centuries, and the enduring impact of these historical events on modern Mauritius.

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**Keywords:** Mauritius, immigration, indentured labor, British colonial era, multiculturalism.

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### **1.1. Introduction**

Mauritius is an island in the South West Indian Ocean. Four hundred years ago there was no indigenous population on the island. All the people in Mauritius are immigrants. Mauritius has known three waves of immigrants namely the Dutch, the French and the British. The first Indians came during the French rule as skilled artisans, experienced labour and good technicians. During the British rule sugarcane

became a lucrative business. Since slavery was abolished in 1835, cheap labour were recruited from India and the bulk of Indians came from North India (Boodhoo, 1993). The indentured labourers came to Mauritius as the Great Experiment by the British Imperial Government. An indentured is a person who came to work on the island for a specific period of time on contract usually for five years and he would get standard of living, wages, ration, housing and medical care. (AGTF 2007). Hunter- Arbuthnot and Company brought the first batch of immigrants on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1834 to Mauritius from India on the ship Atlas. These indentured labourers were despatched to Antoinette phooliar region. Antoinette Phooliar is a remote village situated at Belle Alliance in the district of Riviere du Rempart where they worked sided by side with two hundred slaves in the sugarcane fields (AGTF Newsletter 2013)

Respondent, Mr. P.P, 80 years old lives at Phooliar Nagar. since the age of 8 years old he has earned his living by working on the sugar estate of Antoinette Phooliar. According to him there were 800 strong people of both gender who worked on this sugar estate. They cultivated sugar cane, removed stones and arranged them in piles to act as barriers in sugarcane fields. During harvest season sugarcane workers cut stalk of sugarcane, stripped leaves, chopped the cane, loaded them in carts or wagons and transported them to the factories. Workers had to work in scorching sun, heavy rain, windy seasons and they had to bear pesticides and cane fires. Heavy work loads in the sugarcane fields, lack of food, low wages, incorrect posture and repetitive movements exposed the workers to health problems and early death. Mr P.P narrated that 28 families including his family lived on the Antoinette sugar estate camp which was situated near the kalimaye. According to my respondents a kalimaye is a small place of worship where there is an altar on which seven stones representing Goddess Kali and the seven sisters in the primitive way, which have been built at the entrance of every villages in Mauritius on sugar estates to protect devotees.

People of Hindu faith pray at the Kalimaye. Now these 28 families have moved to Phooliar Nagar few kilometres away where they get more facilities. Another term for estate camp was “camp des indiens” also known as “sugar camps” in English. Throughout the whole indenture system, all of the ancestors and the entire generation lived in those camps. The huts were made up of stones in its pristine state or of aloe thatches and were covered with straw attached with a mixture of soil and cow dung, referred to as “gobar” in Hindi. Rain water poured inside the huts during heavy rainfall and flood. During cyclones all huts were destroyed and had to be rebuilt. Respondent Mr P.P remembers cyclone Carole which struck on the island between 25<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> February 1960 with the highest gusts of 256 km/hr and cyclone Gervaise manifested with highest gusts of 280km/hr between 5<sup>th</sup> February to 7<sup>th</sup> February 1975 which destroyed huts and caused havoc to sugar plantations. There was a long common room known as hangar in which people stayed in joint family. Each family had 2 rooms and maybe in one room there were 15 to 20 people. Not only the labourers, but their children as well were living in the sugar camps for ages. The sugar estate camps in which they lived were not mere “shelters” for the labourers but it has way much more to offer through its historicity unraveling the whole experience of our ancestors. The National Museum Council displayed an open air exhibition at Super U hypermarket at Flacq which I visited in year 2018 on the life of indentured labourers in Mauritius. The following information has been obtained during my visit to the art exhibition. The indentured labourers were provided refuge in

estate camps which were provided by Sugar estates. These were residential quarters and were located near the fields to reduce travel time to work. They consisted of personalised huts or numerous chambers which were known as *barracks* or *hangars*. Stones were used to build barracks. In the room there were few benches, one table and a sendook to put all the clothes.

### **1.2 Living Conditions on Antoinette Sugar Estate**

During the former years of immigration, immigrants were not given lodges to live in. It was until 1867 when the Ordinance 31 of 1867 was passed that employers were obliged to provide lodging facilities to the workers. Normally, indentured labourers were living in lodges that were previously inhabited by the slaves. "Hangars" was the name given to the lodges at that time. On the estate camp, a small area of land was reserved for agricultural and livestock purposes. The quarters for the field workers were limited due to the occupation of the workers. The Trianon Barracks in Mauritius stands as a solid proof of the Indentured Labour system in Mauritius. They signify the sort of settlement site which is a typical example of how Archaeology can bestow a comprehensive understanding of the „indentured experience“. That particular barrack reveals deeply the lives of the field workers in a setting removed from the fields, metaphorically if not geographically. Till date, there is no concise information on the date of construction of the Trianon barrack though there has been a speculation that it dates since the 1880s. Aftermath the Cyclone Carole in 1960, the Trianon Barracks acted as shelter for those families who lost their homes in the horrific cyclone. The walls of the Barracks were made of cut basalt blocks. All the units were well designed. Each unit has a window. The main floor was served as a cooking area though certain families also cooked outdoor. Based on archaeological interpretations, the entire estate consisted of some 1500 men, women and children living in the camps by the end of the 19th century. It could be assumed that the Trianon Barracks were not used as shelter for just anyone but rather reserved for those who occupied a high and important position on the sugar cane fields only. They were reserved for high level employees, and important persons like the sirdar.

Additionally, the Trianon Barracks stands as the singular monument at the present times whose units were different from all the other barracks that Mauritius ever experienced. ( Teelock 2013: 121-13). There were also partitions of barracks in which different families found shelter. Acute poverty, monotony, repetitive lifestyle turned his grandfather mad and he talked alone. Water supply was defective as only one tap near the office was available to supply the whole camp. It was women's duty to carry water from wells, canals and rivers and the well to do daily activities. People took a proper bath once a week. All the women formed groups and went to wash clothes in the nearby river on Fridays. Friday was the day when most women cleaned the house. Respondent Mr P.P narrated : When he worked on the sugar estate he woke up at four o'clock in the morning. The sugar estate manager paid a time keeper who passed on a bicycle and rang a bell to wake up all the workers at 4:15am. Mr P.P was working on a mechanical machine for the making of sugarcane in the sugar factory as assistant. When he woke up in the morning he just washed his face, sometimes he could only sip some tea or he had just time to sip some water. He brought with him a bottle of tea, a piece of bread in a rattan basket. All workers had to bring their own agricultural tools such as pickaxe and sickle. At the age of 8 years he got 20 cents per day while at the age of 9 years he got 40 cents per day. At the age of 53 years he worked for

Rs. 52 per month. Mr P.P said he worked from 4am on the sugar estate and there was no fixed time to come back home. He could even return at 10 pm exhausted.

The living conditions on the sugar estate camps were rudimentary. Lack of sanitation was a common picture and had ripple effect on the health of the inhabitants. Diseases and bacteria were proliferating. In some camps, toilets were established but in some of those camps, they did not exist. At that time, the workers were living a difficult life since apart from the laborious work and low income, they were given few basic facilities. From water shortage to sanitary problems, the workers faced them all. They used pits called „privé“ or pik or latrine as toilets. Usually the pits were surrounded by walls made of cane straw. Lime was regularly poured in the hole to disinfect the area. Some estate camps had no camps or washrooms at all. Kitchens were both indoors and outdoors. Wells were used for water provision and people had to walk long distances to fetch water. This job was allocated to women and children. These poor living conditions of the workers led the authorities to introduce sanitation regulations which were expected to be followed by all people without any distinction. Based on the 1845 regulations, estates where at least 40 labourers were employed and sheltered ought to have a building as hospital. Paradoxically, not all could benefit from the health services for various reasons. One of the main reasons was due to the long geographical location of the hospitals.

### **1.3 The Religious and Cultural Activities on Sugar Estate Camps**

Between 1834 and 1924, more than 454,000 indentured labourers from India came to work on the sugar estates. Even if they were separated from their homeland, they were still nevertheless attached to their culture. Indians on estate campus firstly set up temples and mosques to preserve their rich cultural heritage. The Hindus developed the „Kalimai cult“, Bahariya puja and Dee worship were conducted before each harvest while for the Muslims, Ghoon became a monumental practice of camp life. Religious prayers were performed in the hindu places of worship of the Goddess Kali. Religious festivals like Holi, Divali, Cavadee, Katha, Moharam, Shivratri, wedding celebration and funerals were conducted with the contributions of the inhabitants and at times by the sugar companies. The colonial Government was not against the establishment of holy places like mosques and temples. All the people of different religions co existed. One of the most common sacred sites was the „Kalimai“. Despite all the people were allowed to celebrate, only on festivals like Moharam and New Year that paid leave was given. The Maha „Shivratri“ was one of the first estate holidays in 1939. On this occasion, the Hindus dressed in white were going to the Grand Bassin a holy lake of volcanic origin situated in the district of Savanne to fetch holy water which they would offer at the temple the next day. Yamunnabi, Fet de Mor, the muslims camp residents would share „halwa“ and roti among other camp members. Also, on the occasion of Christmas, children were given free gifts by the owners of the sugar companies and the festival was celebrated in the camp. The festival of „Holi“ was most famous among all the festivals celebrated by those belonging to the Hindu, Tamil, Telugu and Marathis religion. On the eve of holi, they would burn a man made of straw „bril kamon“ and they would all do a gathering in the baitka. Worship and offerings were also given on this event and other cakes like „tekwa“ and „batat“ were also prepared and shared. An inhabitant from the Sans-Souci Estate camp once narrated that elders would go to Montagne Blanche and play the traditional musical instruments which they brought from India

namely „dholok“ which is a drum and „jhal“ which is a percussion musical instrument on the eve of holi festival. (Teelock 2012: 175).

#### **1.4 The Cult Of Kalimai On Sugar Estates In Mauritius**

The “ Kalimaye“ also known as „ kalimai“ is a place of worship dedicated to Goddess Kali. Kalimai was built in most “camps” often located at the entrance of each camp. The “Dhi” was a non-hind spirit and was believed to have existed before the arrival of Indian immigrants. It was considered as representing the plantation owner, the “kaptan”. With time many Afro-Mauritian practised the Kalimai worship ( Teelock 2001)

Mr. P.P who is a Telegu and his Tamil friend who is 69 years old still go to the sugar estate, every morning at four o’clock in the morning after taking a bath, to worship goddess Kali on the Antoinette sugar estate where they used to live. Daily he cleans the kalimai, offers flowers to Goddess Kali, performs prayers and then he and his friend return home. The Kalimai is a place of worship for people of hindu faith. Mr. P.P knows that the kalimai is older than him. He said that there are only one or two kalimai like this in Mauritius as the Kalimai was in an original state. He said that the kalimai is not made of cement. It is made up of stone. There were 7 stones placed on an altar and they represent the seven sisters in the kalimai. In 1964, they have replaced the stones by a statue of kalimaa. Mr. P.P’s friend P.C said : Long ago he witnessed people used to sacrifice goat and hen but now these traditions, rites and rituals have ceased. People only pray with flowers, camphor and light sandal wood and instead of animals Kali devotees offer a „bhatwa“ which resembles a vegetable known as Chinese calabasses as sacrifice. There are no special priests to look after the kalimai. People themselves did the prayer and preserved their culture. All ethnic groups lived side by side. Hindus, Tamil and Telegu prayed in the kalimai.

He explained that all the people on the camp contributed to buy a goat. They sacrificed the animal, poured its blood in front of Goddess kali and afterwards they shared the meat by doing a traditional feast where all camp dwellers ate. However people of low caste sacrificed pig. Christians and Muslims did not pray in kalimai. Even now at the entrance of each village there is a Kalimai. The Kalimai is not a regular temple but a small prayer place usually in the sugarcane fields where people pray to ask for protection.

He remembered that there was only one Muslim in the estate camp and he went to L’Amaury to pray in the mosque. With time he left the estate camp and moved to the nearby village called Piton until he died. There was a Chinese shop in the corner of the street just near the sugar estate camp which was the only shop where camp dwellers bought their provisions. Mr.A.B who lived in another sugar estate called Queen Victoria also explained, the Chinese shop was the main source from where Mauritians would buy their food commodities on credit and written in a red notebook to keep records of all the products they bought from the shop. It was during the 19th century that the Chinese shop which is also known as “Laboutik sinoi” played a pivotal role as it helped to oil the engine of growth in the Mauritian economic sector. In these shops, all items were available and were displayed on the shelves. Some of these were also kept on the floor like sack of rice and vegetables like potatoes, carrots. Mr. P.P was poor and he did not go to school as education was not free. At the age of 8, he worked on the sugar estate and



collected charcoal and was paid 20 cents per day which he gave it to his mother. At that time people worked and gave the money to their mother. Like most respondents aged above 60 years Mr P.P said his father has not narrated the past to him. He said his maternal grandfather came on the boat as all coolies from India.

In the village only a Christian man had television and he allowed all his neighbours to watch television at his place every afternoon. Mr P.P watched television for the first time when he was fifteen years old and films were telecasted in black and white images.

Considering the above claims, one can take reference to Emile Durkheim's theory of organic and mechanical solidarity. In his work "The Division of Labour in Society (1893), Emile Durkheim showed how social solidarity is different in less industrialised societies and in urbanised societies. He uses the concept of mechanical solidarity to explain how societies where there is no division of labour and all people perform similar tasks, have same working experiences and responsibilities at work, tend to promote a kind of social cohesion that helps to stabilise the society, leading to shared morality and collective conscience. This is what he termed as mechanical solidarity- people have a sense of belonging and develop a group identity through similar work, education and religion or lifestyle. Mechanical solidarity was operative in traditional and small-scale societies. Organic solidarity on the other flip of the coin occurs when all people specialise in a particular task and thus complements the tasks of one another. Social cohesion arises as each worker is dependent on the other. This kind solidarity created by dependence is a characteristic of modern societies. Even if all the workers have different lifestyle, experiences, values and interests, the order and very solidarity of society depends on their reliance on each other to perform their specific tasks. From Durkheim's theory (1893), it can clearly be noted that the camps in which Mr. P.P and others were living in as well as their shared experience in the sugarcane cane fields created a sense of mechanical solidarity like the feast on the goat, the watching of television in the Christian man's house, the playing of Gouli danta or even the collective worship in the kalimaye. Mauritius is known for being a country with a melting pot of cultures. The work in the fields has promoted shared interests among all the individuals, that's why today all the cultures co-exist till date in Mauritius. Today, Mauritius still has solidarity but it is more organic solidarity since there has been a rise in automated production machine and specialisation as well.

### **1.5. Solidarity On Estate Camps In The Multicultural Island Of Mauritius.**

Analysis may stretch further when considering the fact that camp residents though they belonged to different religions and had different cultures and beliefs, yet there was communal unity at that time. They lived in harmony and they were also helped by sugar estate companies when the latter agreed the establishment of many religious places. Even if there were men of different faiths, yet they co-existed because of their shared experiences on the sugar cane fields and in the sugar estate camps. Moreover, in the Hindu religion canon, it can be assumed that „baitka“ was regarded as the cornerstone of the society. From social discussions to education, many activities were carried in the baitka. By performing a correlation with the traditional Mauritius to the modern recent one, it can clearly be seen that the Mauritian culture whether Muslims, Tamilian, Christian or Hindus, they all still carry out the same practices. Holi is still celebrated though there has been a certain kind of „excitement“ for this festival.

However, Divali, Shivratri, Christmas, Eid or even Cavadee are still celebrated with great prom by the individuals.

### **1.6. Leisure Activities on Sugar Estates**

Moreover, Mr.P.P stated that he bought a bicycle for 25cents when he was 20 years. He paid a cinema ticket and could watch 3 movies at Riviere du Rempart Cinema. In the camp, Mr. P.P narrated that they played the traditional game of Gouli danta. Children also played the traditional singing game named “Oka boka tin toloka” which has its origin from India. Suchita Ramdin in her book “Traditional singing games of Mauritius” explains how to play it.( Ramdin 1989).

### **1.7. New Disease Amplification**

The journey of indentured labourers was not at all easy when coming to Mauritius. Apart from the long distances that they had to travel by sea, they were also looked upon in Mauritius because they were said to bring unknown diseases in the island from their homeland. The public was alerted, intrinsically by „Le Cernéen“ who reported in 1837 that Indian labourers who were coming in our island were „chétifs, malsains, couverts de plaie, des dartes et de gale.“ A similar report was published by Le Mauricien at that time. Le Cernéen described the Indian Immigrants as unhealthy, puny, laborious, disobedient and intelligent. While Le Mauricien described them as disease carriers, vagrants, trouble-makers, surplus, lazy and alcoholic. Ironically, the Calcutta Courier claimed that Indians were alcolics because of the poor working condition as well as the maltreatment at work. They were neglected and dominated. Out of the 185 new immigrants coming to work on the fields, only 105 remained the next year while the others were admitted in hospitals. Though Le Mauricien tried to cushion reality and kept things under the rug, there were some testimonies which supported the maltreatment of the immigrants working on the sugar estate. One of them was Mr. Sheik Manick, a Muslim man who worked in the agricultural fields and belonged to Mr. Riviere. He stated that, food provided were rudimentary, they were not paid and were not given clothes. When he complained about it, the Muslim man was put behind the bars for two months and was later deported to Calcutta. Once, Sheik Manick told his employer that neglect will result in the death of the workers, moreover the latter said the men can easily be replaced by new labourers upon their death. A cursory review of the above facts goes to show that the slaveowner mentality was still predominant at that time.

In the light of the above exposé, the domination of the workers by the owners and authorities goes to confirm the views founder of the Marxist tradition, Karl Marx and the famous Marxist writer Friedrich Engels. Karl Marx theorised that society is divided into two different classes riddle with conflict and opposing interests. They are the proletariat (wage-earners) and the bourgeoisie (owners). Power is held up by the latter at the expense of the former. Society is based on dialectical materialism and the wage earner is dominated by the bourgeoisie for little or no salary at all. Both Engels and Marx agreed that they are exploited for their long hours of work, have poor living conditions and are maltreated by the high employers. The bourgeoisie controls the workforce through hiring and firing, the proletariat is made to believe that society is just and their situation is normal. Through continuous domination over the working class, the bourgeoisie helps to legitimate the status quo and preserve the cultural hegemony of their dominion. This leads to a false class consciousness whereby the controlled believe his situation

is acceptable when in real it is a myth. This ensures that the power of the high class continues while the poor remains poor. Considering this approach, similar experiences were found in the lives of indentured labourers though the idea of „false class consciousness“ was least likely to be found since many knew about the cruel injustice done to them. ( Haralambos & Holborn ,2013)

### **1.8 Female Emancipation Or Gender Disparity?**

Sugar plantation is one domain which allowed women to enter the world of work just as men rather than being confined to the four walls of the house. However, even if women gained access to work, the worst was waiting for them in the form of sexual harassment, physical, mental and sexual abuse. Most of the females were labourers while only at most four women were in the office and doing paperwork. Women were usually paid Rs.15 extra for harvesting the sugarcane as a motivational reward nevertheless, cane-cutting was very demanding as it consisted of removing dry leaves, removal of weeds using the tool „grat“, planting, apply salt, remove rocks, cut the cane sets, cut and load the sugarcane. Paradoxically, overall, men had a higher pay than women although they did the same task. The reason behind was due to a differentiation in physical strength.

### **1.9 physical Assaults**

Based on information received from a member of the AGTF, it was found that many women were often beaten with sticks by the sirdars. One case in point was when a woman had to be admitted to the hospital. Another case was also claimed by Mr Kuppan who said that a woman labourer from the Mont Désert Alma was severely aggressed by another sirdar. Another case was cited by Burrin where a female worker was compelled to urinate in front of the sirdar because she denied carrying out extra work. (Teelock 2012 )

### **1.10female Exploitation**

In the indenture period, there were widespread stigmas and stereotypes on camp women who were considered as easy preys and having a loose character who usually maintain affairs with higher level sugar estate personnel. Based on the book Angaje: The impact of indenture Vol.1 it was found that Burton Benedict had similar views. He even stated that villagers were not marrying their sons to estate camp women because it was said that the latter had sexual relations with administrators. However information received from other sources point otherwise. An AGTF female informant shed a spotlight on this issue assuming that estate camp women were not engaging in sexual liaisons with these high profile men on their own will. Rather, they were forced to do so for the benefit of their inlaws. Newlywed brides were sent to administrators in the first evening. In exchange, the bride’s family would gain promotions. If their husbands denied sending their wives to the latter, then they would secretly be killed in sugar cane fields. Thus, the fact that women were having frequent liaisons with the estate employers was not a matter of pleasure and of free will, but of sexual exploitation. Most of the time, sirdars, administrators and Indian men were the ones who would exploit the women sexually. A former researcher Marina Carter had shown through her multiple case studies in Lakshmi’s Legacy that female exploitation existed since the epoch of indenture. female camp dwellers were abused and aggressed. From wage discrimination to sexual harassment, female labourers had to face them all. Even in the hospitals they were not given proper treatment and were rather harassed by the male nurses sexually.



The lack of education and knowledge of their basic rights maintained and perpetuated the muteness of females' voices. Life on the camps was really difficult but it was even worse to be a female on the camps given the lack of respect towards them.

#### **1.1.1 Tamil Culture An Oral Narrative On Belle Vue Maurel Camp**

Respondent Mr.A, Tamil educator aged 62 years, narrated about the Tamil community on Belle Vue Maurel sugar estate. He once lived on Belle Vue Maurel camp. He said Tamil immigrants came to Mauritius before Mahé de Labourdonnais. Those who came before were artisans and those who came with Indian immigrants from north India landed in sugar estates as coolies. They were illiterate and came from Madras, Pondicherry, Tanjavar from South India. They had their culture. They brought books (Teokou, Mahabharata in Tamil, Ramayana in Tamil, books of drama and books of Tamil songs). They stayed in sugar estate camps and they prayed what their ancestors were praying. They did not pray to Lord Shiva but they prayed to Amen i.e. Mariamen and Meriga. In ancient time, there was no kovil and it was they who constructed kovil in every sugar estate. In every sugar estate there is a kalimai and it is because of this they prayed in kalimai. They did rituals fire walking. When the white people in charge of the estate gave them holiday example for Christmas and New Year, they seized the opportunity to do walk on fire ceremony. Only Cavadee had specific day that is mid January to mid February. The first kovil was built at Clementia in 1800 the second was Cinatambour in Port Louis. Long ago priests were not so educated. Nowadays they do more rituals. Hindu has baitka while Tamil has Maley Pathe where children learn dance, music, to handle kolaton, they learn traditional cookery of Tamil foods and yoga. He says, : "my mother and father taught me to respect old persons and not to look at them in the eyes but rather to bow my head as a sign of respect." On Fridays women cleaned the house, wash clothes and bath. Friday they call it good day.

#### **1.1.2 An Oral Narrative Of Queen Victoria Sugar Estate By Mr A.B**

Mr A.B Hindu khatiya. The respondent lived in the village of Queen Victoria during his first 25 years on the Queen Victoria sugar estate. There was a hospital which belonged to this mill. A nurse was in charge, and there was a private doctor named Couaccaud who came to consult once a week. He was a private doctor but was employed by the sugar estate. Most villagers worked. Mr. A.B went to primary school at Queen Victoria RCA. It was built with corrugated iron sheet near a river. The priest of the village who was mostly interested in education moved the Queen Victoria RCA School from the river to the centre of the village where it now exists. He was so dedicated that he helped in the digging. There was no Catholic church at Queen Victoria, it was found at St. Jullien village. He said that it is one of the most beautiful Churches that existed. Inside everything is in teak wood.

There were 3 Chinese shops in the village. Liw sen, Lee Wong Chung and la boutique Andrey. People purchased on credit and they pay when they get the salary at the end of the month. Everyone had a „carnet ration“ of red colour in which the Chinese shopkeeper kept his records of things which the customer purchased. There were different ethnic groups at Queen Victoria namely Hindu, Christian, Catholic, there was only 2 Muslim family. There were Tamils and there was even a kovil on the sugar estate near the camp. When we talk about camp we mean people who breed cows. His grandfather lived on the camp. But his father later moved in a village called Camp Alexis. They called it camp Leksi. There

was no temple, Hindus prayed in kalimai. For the temple also known as Shivala, Hindus had to go to Riche Mare which is found 4 to 5 km away. People went there on rare occasions, maybe once or twice in two months. But they would pray there. Every Hindu had a “Mahabirswami” at the entrance of their premises where they would pray to Lord Hanuman. People went to kalimai when they really needed to pray else they went to a river and pray. Hindus pray to river, trees and mountain. They pay homage to all these in which they have belief. Analysis may stretch further when noting that even today the new generation of Hindus still carries out this tradition. On the festival of Maha Shivratri, Hindus go to the Ganga Talao (sacred river) as at Grand Bassin.

### **1.1.3 Indian Culture on Queen Victoria Sugar Estates in Mauritius**

The culture and lifestyle of the indentured immigrants bear much similarity to the lifestyle of Indians. The „Baitka“ originated from these individuals who constructed a small hut „baitka“ where all the Indian workers gathered as well as their families. They discussed about social issues and shared cultural and religious beliefs. It was simply a platform for meeting. The Ramcharitmanas, Ramayana and the Bhagvad Gita were among those sacred texts which were read in the Baitkas. The members formed up a society which was responsible for organising religious festivals like „Holi“ and the „Divali“. The organizing of matrimonial ceremony as well as funerals was also undertaken by the members of the Baitka. It served as an educational institution for children also; the latter would write, read and gain insights on religion and Indian Culture. There were 4 baitkas in Queen Victoria. In 1945 Hindi was not taught in primary school. Queen Victoria RCA was a catholic school so Hindi was not taught. In baitkas when there were festivals they read Ramayana, celebration of holi, Divali, Ganesh Chaturthi and in Naomi everyone united. People were believers. Tamils also participated in Holika dahan. Tamils also helped when we had to go to Grand Bassin, there were Tamil representatives. Tamils celebrated Cavadee and they walked on fire. Mr. A.B also celebrated Cavadee. He walked two and a half kilometers to a village called Bonne Mere. Together with the Tamils, he also took his bath and they all do their rites. They pierce their tongue and other parts of the body and take their cavadee and do the round of the village. There was togetherness. There was understanding. His paternal uncle was a Hindi speaking helped the Tamils pilgrims to remove the needles from their tongue. He kept his fast and when the cavadees walked from the river to the kovil, all villagers stood in front of their house and cooled the road with water. Some people stopped them and prayed to lord Muruga and made wishes by breaking coconuts along the road and kids as well as others were collecting pieces of offerings. Hindus as well collected the coconuts, bananas and other fruits which were offered. On the road lime water was offered to pilgrims. Hindus also distributed lime water in „gilas“ an aluminium cup to Tamil devotees during the festival.

### **1.1.4 Queen Victoria Sugar Factory**

The Queen Victoria sugar factory is based on 2, 708, 90 arpents and an average of 1,530 arpents were under sugarcane cultivation. From 1902 to 1907 the average annual production of sugarcane in tons was 3000 and it rose by 1,870 tons in 1909 – 1912. The highest output level in the year was 5,360 tons. The Queen Victoria Sugar estate Co. controls the sugar estate itself and the manager of the estate was F. Dalais. The Sirdar was in charge of everything in the camp. At 4 in the morning, the latter rang the

bell to wake up all the women. At 5, the second bell was meant to wake up the men. After one hour, upon attending the call, the sirdars would then allocate them their tasks. The field workers were categorized into two groups: petite bande and grande bande. The former is responsible for light works while the latter is endowed with arduous duties. They would carry their tools on the shoulder and move towards the sugarcane fields on foot. Their works depended on the seasons „entre coupe“ (the period in between harvests) and „la coupe“ meaning harvest time. Entre coupe and la coupe were usually between January to mid- July and mid- July to December respectively. Harvest time was during entre coupe in the period of October to January. The tasks of labourers included: rocks removal, ploughing and preparing cuttings for the planting following crop. Since 30 to 40 tons of canes were expected to be cut daily, a large labour force was needed as well as an elaborate organisation. The workers used cutlasses to cut down the canes and made bundles of them to ground level.

These were later loaded in Lorries to be transported to the mills. The working hours varied from a am to 8 pm for work in the sugar house and from 4:30 am to 5pm for work in the fields. Camps were in sugar estates and there were hangars and each compartment had 5 to 6 rooms. It was long and they accommodated rooms depending on size of the family. There were around 10 hangars. Hence different families were living side by side. Husband, wife and children were living in the same room. It is called Promiscuity. The toilet was outside and it was a pit. For bathing there was no bathroom but they made arrangements with gunny bags attached on four sides and people bathed inside this. There was no tap either. They had to fetch water from the river or near the sugar mill. Else people were bathing in the river itself. To wash clothes, everyone went to the river.

#### **1.1.5 Leisure Activities of Indentured Workers and Their Descendants on Sugar Estates**

The Indian immigrants were playing traditional games like Goulee Danda, a cricket-like game which was very popular among the camp dwellers. Drama activities were also present like that of the Ramlila and the Indra Sabha. Overall, the camp residents had a leisure life quite similar to the Indian culture. Also, another common activity among the camp dwellers was horse racing at Champ de Mars in Port-Louis. Horse racing was known as „Indian day“. People would come in carts along with their families while others would walk long distances well dressed.

#### **1.1.6 Bhojpuri Language, an Intangible Heritage of the Indentured Labourers.**

The arrival of the immigrants added a value and cultural importance to the Mauritian linguistic diversity. since Mauritius was more populated with indo-Mauritians and labourers coming from Bihar and other regions of India. People in every corner of the island mostly spoke Bhojpuri. It was a language of respect and thus maintained social solidarity and sense of belonging in the island. Politicians still use bhojpuri language to address the crowd. Bhojpuri Folk songs Geet Gawai have been listed on the Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative list of World Patrimony of UNESCO on Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> December last, at the 11<sup>th</sup> session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO. Bhojpuri was a language used by both elders and younger age groups. Bhojpuri however was not enhanced and promoted only through daily communications in the society but also in the musical platform. It was attributed a musical value which encouraged folk songs. In Mauritius, we have many singers who sang their songs in Bhojpuri. In fact, we can even witness some

young singers though most of them belong to their late 40s and above. Today, in 2018 we still have a channel reserved for Bhojpuri related programmes only. It is the „bhojpuri channel“. We have other competitions held at national level that promoted and still promote the Bhojpuri language. Even if we are in an age of internet and post-modernity and Creole is a vernacular language, Bhojpuri is still thriving in the Mauritian society. Bhojpuri has been a topic of interests among many academic writers. The first to have studied on Mauritian Bhojpuri was Mr. Ramessur Ory, did a phd study in 1970. In order to explain the cultural significance of Bhojpuri in Mauritius, attempts have been made to refer to different theoretical views and views of some personalities. They are as follows: As per Jaynarain Roy (1970), the Bhojpuri language has played a monumental role in our society. It is at the basis of the society itself simply because the Mauritian society has been able to survive culturally from the past till the present (during the past 150 years). Despite the sufferings, chaos and carnage of riot and violence, the Bhojpuri language acted as a pillar in the realm of culture. On the juxtapose, S. Gambhir (1986) believed that at a certain point in Mauritian history, Bhojpuri acted as the principle language across the entire island compared to Creole. Ironically, he also says that the tragedy of Bhojpuri is that it was made an orphan by its own living parents in its own land. Following this assumption, we also have L. P. Ramyeed who was the first scholar to have tried to restore the epoch of Hindi-Bhojpuri in Mauritius. Ramyeed (1985:32) wrote: „actually, literacy and mother tongue education were a problem to Bhojpuri speakers simple because Bhojpuri was not a written language though it was a vernacular one. Also, it was not deemed as appropriate to be studied or written, and no formal education was associated to Bhojpuri.

#### **1.1.7 Food as an Intangible Heritage Based On Indentured Labourers and Their Descendants**

Respondent Mr. A.B aged 75 years who lived on the Queen Victoria estate camp shed light on how food provision was in the past. He said people purchased provision in Chinese shop on credit. At the end of the month when they got their salary, or at the end of the week they would pay. Everyone had a red notebook in which the Chinese shopkeeper wrote all their purchase. Because there was no electricity, there was no refrigerator and people ate salted fish. They ate only two curries. People consumed what they planted. This bears much similarity to the sociological interpretation of the family and its function. The famous writer Fletcher (1966) *The Family and Marriage in Britain* claimed that one of the main functions of the family in the past was „unit of production“. Families in the past were producing and cultivating their own food.

However, industrialisation heralded a new era where families became a „unit of consumption“. In the past families planted and consumed while now they buy and consume. Similar points are made by Young and Willmott (1973). He said that his parents bought essential vegetables such as potatoes, tomatoes and so on. If someone planted a vegetable he would share among neighbours. When guest came, they were not served meat. People reared hens but they rarely killed it. They preferred that the hens laid eggs and they so the eggs in return for money. Mr. A,B favourite food Salmond or „pilchard“. Sardine was quite cheap. Bread was sold at 7 cents. One bread with sardine was sold for 15 cents. Not many people could afford to buy bread. Women cooked „farata“. He ate Litti, till date he prepares it at



home. He further explains the procedure of Litti making. Litti is similar to the dough of farata. Mixed flour with water to make a thick paste, add onion, chili and salt and then put it in brick oven. Now. Oil is not added to the litti. It was good for health. Along with litti they crushed chutney on “roche carri”, grinding stone. In the morning he ate satwa which was made of seven types of cereals such as rice, red lentils, black lentils, dhals, maize, black peas and peanuts crushed on the grinding stones by several women and tied in sweetened hot water.

### **1.1.8 The Mauritius Labour Party**

I was participant observer of the speeches of the leader of the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP) from the year 2016, 2017 and 2018. Red flags floated in the hands of the labour supporters which is symbol of patriotism, workers power, revolt, warning, social justice and strength. The red is also the symbol of democratic socialists. Each year the MLP celebrates its birth anniversary on 23rd February, it celebrates Labour Day on 1st May, pays homage to Anjaley Coopen on 27th September as she is, a symbol of sacrifice, the first lady martyr who lost her life during strikes of 1937. Besides the MLP have other activities. In his speeches during the three consecutive years, the Leader of the Mauritius Labour Party, Dr. Navinchandra Ramgoolam did recap of the history of the Mauritius Labour Party. He said The Mauritius Labour Party is the first biggest political Party in Mauritius, its founder being Dr. Maurice Cure and other members were Anquetil, Guy Rozemont followed by Pandit Sahadeo and many others including SIR seewoosagur Ramgoolam, Seeneevassen, Sir Virasamy Ringadoo. The leader of the Mauritius Labour Party who is above 70 years narrated the past as he was being told by his father and grand father. He said in his speech at Triolet in year 2017 that hundred years back labourers had to wake up very early in the morning to work in the sugarcane fields. They worked in harsh conditions, sweated, and ate only rice and green leaves. In addition sugarcane workers were treated like slaves as they were paid 2cents per day and they had no rights, no dignity, no freedom of speech and no freedom of movement. Labourers on sugar estates were oppressed and power remained among the estate owners. Labourers on sugar estates were victims of violence; they were down graded to lower jobs and lower wages if they took leaves. Working conditions were traumatic and many labourers died at early age of 30 years because of malnutrition, poor health care as there was no doctor. Dr. Navinchandra Ramgoolam's grand-father died in his 30's like many labourers of that time.

The Mauritius Labour Party, the oldest political party in Mauritius was founded by Dr. Maurice Cure on 23rd February 1936 with the aim to fight for: workers rights, progress, freedom, peaceful protest march and an increase in wages. Dr. Maurice Cure had visions and determination to protect workers rights, give them compensation, higher wages with paid leave. The Mauritius Labour Party organised some 55 public meetings to mobilise workers. World depression, drought and diseases in sugar canes led to a fall in the price level thus affecting income of agricultural workers. The Labour movement convinced workers to organise strikes on account of pay. 17,000 sugar estates labourers signed a petition to upgrade their wages. Strikes started on 19th July 1937 at Chebel sugar estates asking for an increase in wages. On 11th August 1937 labourers protested for better pay. On 11th August there were strikes on Bel Etang sugar estates. On 13th August there was strike on the l'Union sugar estates while



200 labourers were armed with a stick. Dewnarain Gujadhur of L'Union Flacq sugar factory fired on workers. Four workers were shoot to death (Sarup, 2008 ).

In the newsletter dated 2Nov 2012, it is highlighted that 110,000 complaints were lodged in colonial court for non- payment of wages between 1860 to 1885. 300,000 labourers were arrested as vagrants. Labourers were denied of freedom. Thousands died due to cruel treatment. More than hundreds committed suicide.( AGTF 2012)

On 27th September 1943 the deadly shooting at Belle Vue Maurel took place. Four persons died namely: Kistnasamy Mooneesamy 29 years, Moonsamy Moonien 12 years, Soondrum Pavattan also known as Anjalay Coopenaged 32 years and Marday Ponapen aged 16years. Anjaley Coopen lost her life and she was pregnant (Peerthum & Peerthum).

Today the statue of Anjaley Coopen which is situated in Port Louis facing the supreme court, the old chimneys standing in sugar cane fields, the Aapravasi Ghat which is now a world heritage site, the folk museum and the Beekrumsing Ramlallah modern digitally equipped museum bear testimony of the struggle of indentured labourers and their descendants. The Mauritius Labour Party organised to force change and it became a political force bearing socialist foundation as it works for workers rights and welfare. The Mauritius Labour Party succeeded in prohibiting capitalist exploitation of sugarcane labourers, implementing socialist values, giving indentured labourers and their descendants universal suffrage for the working class, rights to vote at 18years , free education so that poor people can overcome illiteracy, free healthcare so that anyone who is sick and poor can have recourse to doctors , old age pension as a recognition for hard work done for the country, free transport so that children of poor families can go to school and so that poor people can travel free during old age. Mauritians is the rare country in the world which is a welfare state thanks to the Mauritius Labour Party.

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