

Beneficiaries of Empire? : Mapping the Trajectories of Transformation of Indian Labour Diaspora in Mauritius

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*'The contrast between the lean, hungry Cassius-looking colliers who arrive at Port Louis, and the stout, muscular well-fed fellows with well-lined purses who leave its shores, is very remarkable, and good proof both of the healthiness of the climate and the excellent treatment they receive.'*⁷

The journey of the Indian labour diaspora which began on 2nd November 1834 with the arrival of 34 labourers on board ship Sarah to work on sugar plantations in Mauritius reached a celebrated landmark at the time of independence in 1967 when Dr. Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, a descendent of an indentured labourer, became the premier of independent Mauritius. This pristine traverse of indentured labourers - from victims of an oppressive labour regime to the fore of the post-colonial Mauritian state – has been often ascribed as a circumstantial outcome of the plantation regime and the achievers of the old diaspora are labelled as 'beneficiaries of the empire'. This article endeavours to examine this underlying formulation by posing a counterfactual proposition in terms of benefits empire realised through the indentured diaspora. I shall be arguing that the structures are important for human progression but the agency, which in this case is of indentured labourers, was furthermore critical in inscribing this phenomenal success story. The achievements must also be celebrated as the accomplishments of their aspirations and ardent endeavours for socio-economic and political mobility, rather than merely an affirmative outcome of the indenture system, as often being argued and theoretically sustained by the orientalist rationale. To sustain my argument, I shall try to propose a counterfactual proposition for benefits empire realised through labour diaspora. To underline the agency of the labour diaspora and their volition I shall also trace the excursion of the Indian labour diaspora in three essential domains: acquisition of property, education, and political consciousness.

This paper is divided into three sections: the first section sets the background by giving a narrative of the Indian labour diaspora in Mauritius and the historiography of the 'beneficiaries of empire argument'; the second

section attempts to underline certain benefits the empire realised through the indentured labourers and in the third and final section, I have tried to ascertain the extent to which the achievements of labour diaspora can be celebrated as accomplishments of their aspirations and ardent endeavours.

I

The expansion of the capitalist world economy under the aegis of imperialism necessitated a colossal demand for labour, especially for labour-intensive plantation work, which could not be fulfilled by the locally available labour force in the regions of expansion. The problem of labour scarcity was further augmented by the abolition of slavery throughout the empire. To meet this increased demand for labourers which was required for the growth of the capitalist production system, a 'new labour regime was inaugurated' in which 'labour began to flow from regions where people were unemployed, or displaced from agriculture or cottage industries, towards regions of heightened industrial or agricultural activity.'² One of the most important flows of labourers was the immigration of Indian labourers to work in labour-intensive plantation settlements like Mauritius, Trinidad, Fiji, Guiana, etc.³ These settlements were developed by the imperial powers essentially to facilitate the further growth of the capitalist metropolis by producing raw materials for industrial or human consumption. Emigration under this stream was conducted under a well-structured state-regulated indenture system and the 'immigrants' passages were sponsored. Immigrants were tied to a contract of service, often entered into at the source of origin itself, for a fixed tenure and type of work to be performed and they were legally compelled to observe the terms and conditions of the contracts. Emigration of Indian labourers was carried out under government regulation from three principal ports – Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay; though some emigrants were illegally shipped from Pondicherry also which was under French possession. Indian emigrants who went to distant plantation settlements under a contract system came from diverse regions. They came from tribal regions of Eastern India, Bihar, North West Provinces (present Uttar Pradesh), Madras Presidency, and some from Western India. In the later period, many labourers from Northern regions – western parts of United Provinces and present-day Haryana also emigrated. The main regions of labour supply were tribal regions of Chota Nagpur in eastern India, Saran, Chapra, Shahabad, Champaran, Gaya, and Patna in Bihar; Banaras, Ghazipur, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Basti, Bahraich, Jaunpur in the United Provinces; Chingalpet, Tanjore, Trichirapally, South and North Arcot, Salem, Coimbatore, Vizagapatam in southern India; and Ratnagiri region in western India.

Mauritius was the site of a 'great experiment' of the immigration of Indian labourers to work on sugar plantations under the indenture system. It started in 1834 and with occasional prescriptions, it continued till the late 19th C, though officially it ended in 1912. It is generally estimated that during this period the total influx of immigrants from India to work under the indenture system in Mauritius was a little more than 450,000. These indentured

labourers had the choice to go back after the successful completion of their period of industrial residence. Some of them returned to India at different junctures, yet most of them stayed back in Mauritius, and by the end of the 19th Century, they enumerated more than two-thirds of the total population of the island. Despite a very repressive labour regime and innumerable restrictions on their mobility and freedom, some of which we shall be discussing later in this paper, the transformation of the Indian labour diaspora has been exemplary. When I present it as an extraordinary trajectory of human advancement it raises certain doubts about the normative linearity and equivalence for every segment of the Diasporic community. I must put a caveat here that I do not intend to undermine the very fact that this transformation was not idyllic, unequivocal, and equally blissful for all the segments of the Indian labour diaspora. Attributing to certain considerations, the transformation was more blissful for some than the many. However, despite the apprehension of portraying only the glazed exterior of a rather complex and rough process, I would adopt a broader take on this issue and discuss the transformation as progressive for the whole of the Diasporic community.

The most obvious visual marker of this transformation could be the contrasting imageries of a coolie landing at Port Louis and the photo of Dr. Ramgoolam taking the charge of PM's office at the time of independence. However, it was most vividly used by colonial administrators, plantation lobbies, and supporters of the indenture system. Committee on Labour Requirements in Mauritius underlined this transformation by contrasting the physical appearance of labourers before and after the emigration to Mauritius – 'from poor, sickly, emaciated to the state of the healthy, form filled out and muscles developed.'⁴

This initial attempt to underline the benefits of indentured immigration for the distressed Indians by comparing their appearance in India and the colony continued throughout. Dr. Comins who was deputed by the Indian government to enquire about the condition of Indian immigrants in the West Indies wrote in 1891:

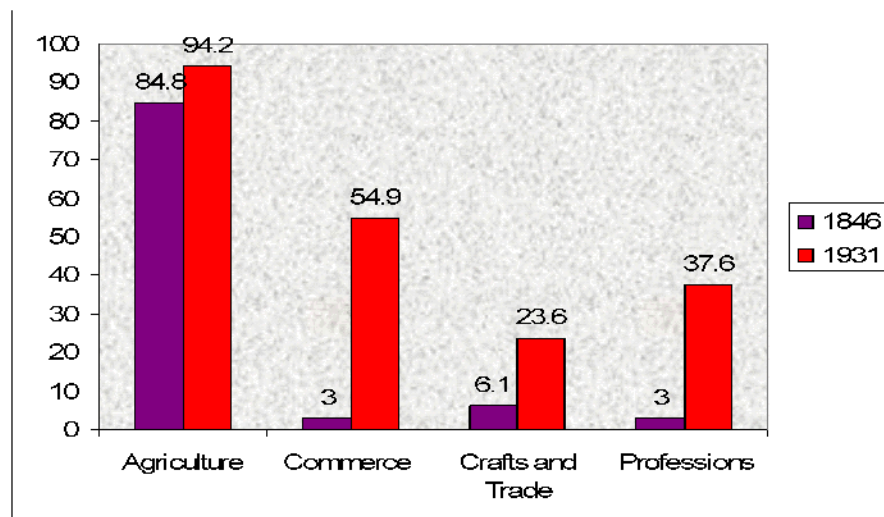
'No one who knows the Indian Cooly well can fail to be struck by the great difference between the cooly in India and his children born in the colony... The children born in the colony of Indian parents revert to a higher type of civilization, and in appearance, manners and intelligence are so much superior to their parents that it is difficult to believe they belong to the same family'.⁵

Sanderson Committee, which was appointed to enquire about the condition of Indian emigrants and the general working of the system in 1910, presents this out-of-the-ordinary transformation through the following allegory:

"A young Indian gentleman from Trinidad, who had come to England to complete his education and had just been called to the

Bar at Lincoln's Inn, also came before us. His father had originally arrived in the Colony as an indentured coolie, but had eventually himself become a landed proprietor.."⁶

In the specific context of Mauritius, this committee noted in its report in 1910 that the value of the property purchased by the Indian diaspora between 1864 and 1900 was Rs 24,159,945 and their deposits in Savings Banks were Rs 1,363,708.⁷ In the year 1871 total number of independent proprietors among the Indian labour diaspora was 314 which increased to 1,074 in the year 1891.⁸ In 1920 Indian diaspora owned 88,000 acres of land in Mauritius and was growing 44% of the total cane cultivated.⁹ The following illustration shows the augmented presence of the Indian labour diaspora in various sectors of the Mauritian economy.



Indian Diaspora in Various Occupations in agriculture it does not appear that dramatic because it included agricultural labourers and landowners.

In the political realm also Indian diaspora acquired a position of prominence. In the 1948 elections, the Labour Party (representative political party of the Indian diaspora) won 19 seats in the Legislative Assembly and eventually, Dr. Seewoosagur Ramgoolam became the Prime Minister of independent Mauritius in 1968.

What made this transformation possible? Colonial authorities and planters, who were arguing for its continuance despite the stiff opposition from the liberal lobby in Britain and nationalist leaders in India, argued that it was the system of indenture immigration that provided the impoverished population of India the opportunity to make this accomplishment. Secretary of State found it as 'among the few resources open to the sufferers for escaping these calamities (poverty and distress), one is emigration to Mauritius..¹⁰ On a much more complex and greater political level of legitimisation of the

indenture system, it was described 'as a powerful agent of civilisation'¹¹ which not only cared for the economic and physical improvement of the indentured labourers but for their social and moral advancement as well which made them suitable for the new, civilised world. It worked as a 'rightful engine' for the coolies enabling them to realise the gains from this system which eventually enabled them to improve their lot and made this transformation possible.

Colonial authorities and plantation lobby attributed the indenture system to the moral-material improvements the indentured immigrants made in the plantation colonies because they needed the continuous influx of indentured labourers to sustain the plantation endeavour and capitalist gains. However, their reasoning has been adopted by the revisionist scholars of labour diaspora. Immigration under the indenture system was seen as the 'escape hatch'¹² – the only way of survival and 'an increase in opportunities, incentives to industry, security, and release from the bondage of traditional custom, caste prejudice and social disapproval.'¹³

There is a peculiar analogy between the revisionist historiography and earlier imperial rationalization in accrediting the indenture system only for the achievements of labour diaspora – 'it (indenture system) not only opened unsurpassed opportunities for the intending immigrants but also provided greater economic gains...and protection to their descendants.'¹⁴ Indentured immigration proved to be working for the overall progress of the labour diaspora as it provided not only unsurpassed economic opportunities and incentives to industry in the colonies but also permanent release from irksome and oppressive social customs, caste prejudices, and general social degradation which these emigrants were being subjected to in India. As the next stage of this normative analysis, the revisionist scholarship espouses the ideals of 'imperial liberalism'. They label the Indian labour diaspora as 'beneficiary of empire' - this diaspora could flourish because the empire facilitated their escape from the 'land of despair' to the 'land of opportunities' through the indenture system and more importantly empire protected this Diaspora under the new labour regime through constant scrutiny and regulation so it works in favour of labourers and does not turn into a repressive regime.

II

In this section I shall try to question the 'beneficiaries of empire' argument through a comprehensive analysis of three interrelated domains: benefits empire realised through labour diaspora, the role of empire in restricting the mobility of indentured immigrants from plantations, and the role of empire in creating the conditions of despair in India.

1. Benefits to the Empire

Indentured immigration was closely linked with the acquisition of new territories and the expansion of the plantation economy under the imperial order. This was acknowledged by the plantation lobby itself. The influx of Indian indentured labourers was considered to be inevitable for the survival

of the plantation economy throughout the empire. Gladstone wrote to the Gillanders Co. which was conducting the labour emigration to Mauritius, 'a moderate number of Bengalees, such as you were sending to the Isle of France (Mauritius) might be very suitable for our purpose.'¹⁵

When indentured immigration was suspended for alleged abuses, Gladstone was at the forefront of its resumption. His rationale was not benevolence – saving the Indian population from distress but the very benefit of the plantation economy and eventually the empire. He wrote to the Colonial Secretary, 'We cannot doubt but that Lord Glenelg, as well as the other members of his Majesty's Government, will see and admit the great importance of these suggestions (resumption of emigration from India) to the future preservation and prosperity of not only British Guiana, but also of most of our other West India colonies.'

The fortune of the Mauritian sugar economy as the largest sugar-producing colony in the British empire was unswervingly linked with the influx of Indian immigrants.

Table: 1
Immigration of Indentured Labourers from India and Annual Sugar Production in Mauritius

Period	Annual average short tons Sugar production	* % of total world production	The arrival of Indian emigrants
1835-9	36367	-	25,202
1840-4	37596	3.8	46,815
1845-9	62466	5.0	36,960
1850-4	81588	5.2	68,163
1855-9	133172	6.8	112,636
1860-4	135503	6.8	49,970

Another factor that critically establishes the economic purposes rather than the civilising motives of the indenture system is the critical link between the influx of immigrants and the status of the sugar economy. In 1865 when the sugar industry in Mauritius faced a financial crisis, the influx of Indian immigrants declined from 20,383 in 1865 to 313 in 1867. Contributions of the Indian labour diaspora are underlined undeniably by Beaton Patrick in the following passage:

'Those swarthy orientals, so thinly clad, are the muscles and sinews of Mauritian body politic. They are the secret source of all the wealth, luxury and splendour with which the island abounds. There is not a carriage that rolls along the well macadamised chaussee, or a robe of silk worn by a fair Mauritian, to the purchase of which the Indian has not, by his labour, indirectly contributed. It is from the labour of his swarthy body

in the cane-fields that gold is extracted more plenteously than from the diggings of Ballarat.¹⁶

2. Role of Empire in Restricting the Mobility of Labour Diaspora

Moving out of the confines of the plantation order was the first stage of the social-economic mobility and transformation of the labour diaspora. The 'protectionist regime' of the empire tried to deny every occasion available for indentured immigrants to be free from contractual obligations and pursue their desired vocations as late as in the 1870s and 1880s through stringent regulations in the name of vagrancy regulation and other disciplinary tools. The most notorious among all was the Ordinance 31 of 1867 which surpassed all the previous legislations in severity and intolerance against old immigrants. As a result, the number of arrests among the Indian labour diaspora for alleged vagrancy increased about three times in two years – 10,970 arrests in 1867 to 30,904 in 1869. The real intent of anti-vagrancy legislation was not the prevention of crime among the old immigrants¹⁷ as it was often promulgated by the colonial authorities but to restrict their mobility from the estates even after the completion of indenture and therefore to ensure their availability for plantations by placing stringent legal constraints on old immigrants' efforts to move beyond the confines of plantations and contractual obligations of indenture and to pursue a vocation of their choice. The Royal Commission notes that between 1861 and 1871, from 12 to 17% of the total male population of the Indian labour diaspora was arrested for vagrancy.

The real intent of vagrancy legislation was exposed by Geoghegan in his most comprehensive report on indentured emigration from India. He wrote, 'on the whole then, the tendency of Mauritius legislation has been, ..., towards reducing the Indian labourers to a more complete state of dependence upon the planter and towards driving him into indentures'.¹⁸

Another reason for the stringent regulations on labour mobility in the 1860s was the crisis in the sugar economy. The 1860s was a period of economic crisis and depression for the sugar economy of Mauritius, primarily due to the changing composition of the world sugar market and a sharp decline in the price of sugar in the export market. It also marked a decline in the arrival of new immigrants from India. Instead of adopting more productive structural changes in the system of production, which they eventually did in the late 1870s onwards through *Metayage* and *Morcellement*, the Mauritian government and plantation lobby adopted a one-dimensional response by reproaching the instability of the labour market responsible for the crisis and responded by coercive strategies of labour control. Free labourers were blamed for the volatility of the labour market and crisis and harsh legal provisions were placed to push free labourers to enter into contractual service. Planters responded to the crisis of the sugar economy and its sinking prospects in the 1860s by forcing the labourers to continue to work on plantations under contractual bindings and anti-vagrancy legislations facilitated planters'

attempts in effectively curtailing the prospects of labour mobility or any scope for labourers' bargaining to increase wages.

3. Role of Empire in Creating the Condition of Despair in India

Most proponents of the 'beneficiary of empire' argument emphasise the conditions of despair in India and argue that emigration was the only way out for the distressed population of India and initiating the indentured immigration empire helped them not just in survival but also provided exceptional opportunities to progress. However, now we have a substantial body of scholarly work that establishes beyond doubt the role of empire in creating the conditions of despair in India which pushed the population to those distant plantation colonies. These scholars have tried to explain the factors for emigration by establishing links between migration statistics and famine¹⁹, de-industrialisation, de-peasantisation, forced commercialization, political instability, etc.²⁰ and empirically established the responsibility of colonial rule for creating a crisis in which people were forced to migrate. Failure of the colonial government in redressing the grievances of the peasantry in unfavourable natural conditions has been recognised by many scholars who have linked the figures of migration with crop failures or famine and concluded that 'during the years of famine or sub-famine colonial emigration was heavy'.²¹

The other important factor which pushed the Indian population out of the country was 'deindustrialization' or the decline of traditional industries and manufacturing like weaving due to the negative policies of colonial rule which prohibited the growth of indigenous industries by various methods of taxation including unfair countervailing duties and which promoted the penetration of machine made cheaper products into the village communities.²² This rampant deindustrialization created a massive unemployed workforce that had no other means of subsistence but to emigrate to locations outside India. In eastern districts of North Western Provinces, (later United Provinces) 'the weavers had taken themselves to agriculture or other labour, to menial services, emigration to Mauritius, and even elsewhere and even to begging'.²³ Similar was the fate of weavers from the South where having lost their means of livelihood, weavers were going to Bourbon and Mauritius in large numbers.²⁴

In addition to these economic determinants of push alternatives, there are some political and social push factors as well that contributed to indentured migration. The significance of the political push factor is confined to just one occasion (the Revolt of 1857) in the historiography of indenture emigration and that too in a limited manner with very moderate implications.²⁵ The revolt of 1857 and the subsequent suppressive activities of the British government created a situation of turmoil in Northern India. After the 1857 revolt, there was a massive political and economic dislocation²⁶ and thousands of people lost their jobs as they were working in the army and allied services which were the major source of employment and livelihood for people in these regions. This created a vulnerable workforce that had no

choice but to look out for other means of survival and emigration to plantation settlements came as an obvious choice for them as there was hardly any other option available at home. Many people chose to emigrate as an escape from impending punishment in severe post-mutiny suppression by the British authorities.²⁷ Against this backdrop, emigration from India reached its all-time peak. The figure for Emigration to Mauritius from Calcutta in 1856-57 was 3334, which increased five times to 15,980 in the year 1858-59.²⁸ This pushed the quantum of emigration from other Indian ports as well, where emigrants mainly from the dismantled army units which used to be one of the major sectors employing the young Indian population.

These details establish beyond doubt that the empire cannot be discharged from its responsibility for creating the conditions of despair in India which forced the people to emigrate.

4. Other Benefits?

Apart from counting material benefits for the labour diaspora, the beneficiaries of the Empire argument put forth several other civilising benefits as well. These were primarily the emancipation of women and their economic independence, and the moral advancement of the Diasporic community. Let us critically evaluate these claims as well.

It is often argued that indentured immigration provided the opportunity for Indian women to escape from the repressive social order of India and economic independence. Two prominent colonial officials Major Pitcher and George Grierson believed that emigration would benefit the vulnerable section of the female population of India - widows, single destitute women, or women who were abandoned by their husbands or families by providing an alternative to their oppressive and hostile social order where the only alternative they had was prostitution. Taking lead from their arguments, revisionist scholars of the indentured diaspora who have studied its gender perspectives describe indentured emigration as a 'great escape' or 'site of liberation' where single women choose to emigrate to improve their socio-economic condition.²⁹ Emmer suggests that indentured emigration was a vehicle for female emancipation and an escape from a culture that was hostile to single women.³⁰ Brij Lal argues that 'migration was not a new or unknown phenomenon for Indian women' and counts women's reasons to leave their homes: to escape from domestic quarrels, economic hardships, the social stigma attached to young widows and brides who had brought inadequate dowry, and the general dreariness of rural Indian life³¹. However, we have an enormous volume of records showing that women were subject to all kinds of exploitation on plantations, and prejudices were at work against them, often more severely than in their homeland. They were called low character, were subject to physical abuse, and were even murdered because of troubled relationships and jealousy.

The promotion of the emigration of women was based more on practical considerations rather than morals or to liberate them from social repression. Promoting the emigration of women and family groups became a priority for

the Mauritian administrators to encourage the settlement of the Indian emigrants and therefore secure a readily available settled labour force. '...object of regulations to secure for the colony a permanent rather than a temporary and unsettled immigration'³². For this purpose, they were also very particular about the preferred age of the women emigrants so they could form conjugal ties and therefore induce the labourers to settle down. The economic emancipation of women because of wage earnings does not hold much weight, particularly in the case of the Indian labour diaspora in Mauritius. In 1911 total female population of the Indian labour diaspora in Mauritius was 118,723 out of which 108,332 were listed as 'without occupation'.³³

The moral advancement of the labour diaspora is substantially countered by the official literature of the empire itself. The official lexicon was extremely pejorative towards the immigrant labourers and it was used by the planters to establish their domination over the labourers. The moral domination was being attempted to establish through a two-fold technique – indentured labour was referred to in derogatory, dehumanising terms in the language of command and blamed all the wrongs on plantations.

In the language of command, indentured labourers were referred to as 'coolies', habitual idlers, nuisances, compulsive liars, and immoral and were often not even considered human beings. When they tried to escape the harshness of the work schedule, they were condemned as lazy idlers who needed to be dealt with severely. Similar was the response when they complained of sickness. For the high mortality rates during transportation and on plantations, indentured labourers' dirty habits and unhealthy way of life were blamed, and for the unfulfillment of production, their idleness was held responsible. Another more disparaging reference was made towards the women immigrants. They were described as of low character responsible for the immoral lives and quarrels among the indentured labourers.

Authorities of indenture regimen used these instruments to dehumanise and demoralise the labour and therefore trim down their physical-moral strength, so they accept the authority and domination of the planters and obey the commands without any possibility of defiance and resistance. This was used also to justify the coercive labour regulation strategy because somewhere deep in the minds of the planters and colonial authorities remained what Montesquieu argued to defend coercion in slavery on grounds that Africans were not quite human and people from tropical lands needed coercion because the climate made them slothful.

III

In this final section, I shall try to study the agency of the Indian labour diaspora to ascertain the extent to which the achievements of the Indian labour diaspora can be celebrated as the accomplishments of their aspirations and ardent endeavours. I shall trace the agency of labour diaspora at two levels – protest and its foray into political-economic domains.

1. **Protesting Labourers**

In most of the historical narratives of the working lives of indentured labourers, there is not much discussion about their protests, possibly because of the absence of dramatic events. Because of extreme dependency, subordination, and the repressive regime, it is not very valid to expect labour rebellion from indentured labourers. Indian labourers, despite having awareness of their belonging to the same class, lacked the 'class consciousnesses'³⁴ and failed to discern its political ramifications. The augmentation of class consciousness was further restrained by the severe restrictions imposed upon the mobility of labourers off estates because the very emergence of class consciousness required intra-community exchanges and collective initiatives. Indentured labourers were housed on the estates themselves without any links with wider socio-economic or political networks of the island and there was no space for inter-community exchanges as well. In this secluded condition, there was no class consciousness enabling them to relate their discontent with the other's dissatisfaction and this explains to an extent why the protests of Indian labourers remained individualistic and there was no collective resistance against the repressive plantation regime for very long. Because of all these limitations, the protests of Indian labourers have been characterised as predominantly individualistic, and covert, and no great 'mythical revolution' took place on the plantations in Mauritius. However, we can trace events of protest in the indentured labour regime since the very beginning though these were more covert, unstructured, and individual resistance.

Under the contractual bindings of the indenture system and repressive discipline, immigrant labourers could not openly defy the order of the authorities. In such an austere situation, apart from exploring the legal channel of protest in form of complaints to authorities, labourers' anguish was articulated by employing individualistic modes of protest such as desertion, absenteeism, spontaneous attacks on the property of planters, extreme distress even suicides. Borrowing the conceptual term from James Scott and taking a cautious note of his caveat for not overly romanticising these 'weapons of the weak', I also try to delineate these modes of protests in terms of 'everyday forms of resistance' which were informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains.³³ However, the nature of protest did not remain always individualistic and covert in Mauritius. By the end of the 19th century, protests became more articulate and began to occur as group actions. The most dramatic was the 1937 riots over the price of sugarcane cultivated by Indian farmers. 1937 riots were so widespread, they swept across the island. It started with cane growers' decision not to sell their cane in Union Flacq. Soon spread to other estates across the island. More radical forms of protest – burning of a cane field, overturning trucks and carts transporting cane to mills, etc. took place during these riots. Most dramatic was the firing on a sugar estate where a couple of protestors died in police firing which was owned by a member of the Indian diaspora. This particular

episode illustrates the larger consolidation of working classes, supported by workers in docks, mills, and vegetable growers, and the 1937 riots were unique in another sense that they brought the class dimension as well.

2. Into the Positions of Prominence

During the centenary celebrations of the arrival of Indian immigrants in Mauritius in 1935, a leader of the Indian diaspora R K Boodhun underline three factors for the transformations of the Indian diaspora – acquisition of property, education, and political consciousness. The foray of the Indian diaspora into these domains began from the 1870s onwards and in the following pages, I shall try to map the intrinsic tangibles of transformation in these three domains.

i. From Labourers to Landowners

The first batch of Indian immigrants arrived in 1834 to work on sugar plantations owned by white planters and these immigrants had no property to claim, even their clothes and utensils were provided by the planters. But in 1920, these immigrants and their descendants owned 44 percent of the total cultivated land in Mauritius.³⁶ This sweeping transformation of indentured diaspora from landless labourers to the significant landholding class of the island was achieved through a larger process of dynamic social and economic change of the Indian immigrant community *vis a vis* the location and it involved two entwined processes: first, acquisition of property by the immigrant labourers and second, their settlement outside estates. The dynamics of these changes in Mauritius, as Richard Allen argues, have been analysed in very general terms or remain undescribed. Raj Virahsawmy, in his study of morcellement and emergence of villages in Mauritius, describes the emergence of Indian small planters as a consequence of emerging capitalism and the transformation of Mauritius from a semi-capitalist plantation economy to an agrarian capitalist economy.³⁷ Another scholar of the political economy of Mauritius, M.D. North-Coombes describes this as the rise of a semi-proletarianized peasantry.³⁸ More recently, Richard Allen has tried to study the emergence of Indian small planters more comprehensively by linking it up with the 'grand morcellement' and the financial conditions of the Mauritian sugar industry.³⁹ But the very crucial question which remains unrequited is why the Indian immigrants decided to buy the small plots of land when these tiny plots were economically not very self-sustaining and they had to work as labourers to meet their requirements. The operation of economic factors offers explanations only for the availability of the plots and fails to elucidate the motivation behind the immigrants' decision to buy them. To explicate this decisive motivation factor, we shall go back to the norms of social prestige and cultural significance of land ownership in the society which these immigrants came from. In the village society of India, land ownership had, and still has, very significant ramifications for one's status in society and the respect he commanded. When the Indian immigrant community got the opportunity to move out of estates, they aspired to attain some respectable social footing, and the rare opportunity they had to

accomplish this dream was through purchasing land which was available in the 1860s onwards owing to various factors related to the transformation of the Mauritian political economy. This symbolic socio-cultural significance of land ownership to an extent explains the rationale of immigrants' choice to buy small plots of land. The opportunity of acquiring land was provided to the Indian immigrants through the process of subdivision of estates which was termed as *grand morcellement* in the contemporary administrative accounts as well as in the recent literature. *Grand morcellement* was central to the emergence of a class of small planters for the first time in the history of the island. Since almost all of these small planters were Indian immigrants, it had far-reaching consequences in the socio-economic development of the Indian immigrants and subsequently their participation in the political processes and formations of Mauritius. The process of morcellement helped the Indian immigrant community to emerge as the most prominent cane cultivators by the time indentured immigration came to an end. In 1921 they counted for 93 percent of the total planters of the island and they were cultivating about 44 percent of the total area under cane cultivation.

Once the initial break was made, Indian immigrants achieved phenomenal success in acquiring properties. Between 1895 and 1900, the property acquired by Indian immigrants was valued at more than Rupees 10,297,506.⁴⁰ According to Richard Allen's estimates, Indian immigrants invested more than 24 million Rupees in acquiring landed properties between 1864 and 1900.⁴¹ The amount of capital invested by Indian immigrants in acquiring landed properties was incredible, especially when we take into account the low levels of their earnings which ranged between 5 to 7 Rupees per month and that too entailed many deductions. So how the immigrants did mobilise the resources for such a massive investment? To meet the capital requirements, immigrants used every possible means available – their savings, borrowings from money lenders who were usually sirdars, or payments in instalments. Because of the specific arrangements on the estates, Indian immigrants had very little opportunity to splurge – their food and clothing were provided by the planters, and they were not allowed to move beyond the estates to go to towns or markets. In addition, many labourers made use of the uncultivated areas in and around the estates to grow vegetables and maintain livestock, which increased their earnings. All these factors contributed to the high proportion of savings by the immigrant community which they either remitted to the homeland or more commonly used to acquire property. Most of the properties acquired by Indian immigrants were small holdings, often less than two acres, and therefore these individual savings and petty borrowings could provide the capital for small acquisitions, but purchasing the larger estates required more capital. According to Allen, Indian immigrants arranged the capital for the larger plots either by making joint purchases or payments in instalments. He cites several cases where immigrants paid a much smaller amount initially and the rest amount over a period of five or six years⁴², often on quite favourable terms

compared to borrowings from money lenders.

However, the symbolic significance was immense. It marked the genesis of a much larger and gradual process of the socio-economic and political advancement of a diasporic community. Indian immigrants bought plots of land well beyond their means by putting in the savings of their lifetime and heavy borrowings for protracted durations which at times turned disastrous for quite a few of them, yet they accepted the challenge to struggle against their predicament. While working in the cane fields under severe repression and relentless humiliation, these immigrant labourers had a dream and they sacrificed their present and immediate future to make this reverie into reality, to accomplish a privileged social and economic status for themselves and their future generations in their adopted land.

ii. Education and Emancipation

For Mauritian authorities, Indian indentured labourers were primarily 'transient sojourners' who had come to Mauritius as labourers to work on plantations and would eventually return to their homelands therefore there was no logic or requirement to provide them with education. The more fundamental reason for this slackness towards providing education was the inherent logic of the capitalist production system which does not permit any investment for which there was no positive return. Despite this general lackadaisical attitude, colonial authorities at times put across the idea of educating the children of labouring classes though most of the time it remained at the levels of rhetoric and individual opinion. There was a very strong pejorative undertone in the purpose of educating the children of immigrants. They were being educated not for their overall growth but to learn their obligations and limitations as servants. They were to be educated to dissuade them from turning towards the anti-social disruptive ways of life and it was not at all aimed at improving their general condition by genuinely educating them. As an obvious outcome, in 1867 there were only 1287 children from the Indian community attending government schools. Initially, the Indian diaspora saw sending their children to school as a waste of labour, and also they were apprehensive about the loss of social and cultural values in the alien education system. However, from the 1870s onwards, there was an increased awareness for educating children as education was perceived as a vehicle of social-economic emancipation and upward mobility. The first demand for education at the community level came in 1880 when more than 7000 members of the Indian community submitted a petition to the Governor for a separate education system.⁴³ At the turn of the century, the attitude of the Indian immigrants witnessed gradual positive change in favour of educating their children as Governor Jerningham reported to the Secretary of State, 'The half-time schools are rapidly becoming full-time second grade schools, a proof that Indian parents are anxious to give to their children the full benefit of a whole day's education'.⁴⁴ This affirmative outcome of this changed attitude soon began to reflect through the increased representation of the Indian community in different 'white collar' vocations like clerks and some even

going to European countries after getting an education from the prestigious Royal College, as a report observed in 1906:

'Many of their children are educated in the Government Schools and have become clerks in Government and mercantile houses. Several have obtained the laureateship at the Royal College and taken up liberal professions in Europe.'⁴⁵

The diasporic community not only became attentive towards getting the basic education but also turned their attention towards access to more specialised and highly professional education like medicine and law. In a petition to the Governor, the members of the Indian community tried to attract his attention to the confusion created by the discrepancies in the compatibility of secondary education between the Mauritian and Indian education systems and demanded special facilities for the diasporic Indians for their entry into Indian universities, especially in law and medical education. By the 1920s, the attendance of Indian children in different schools, despite remaining at a low relative proportion, crossed the total attendance of the children from the General population for the first time. According to Census enumerations of 1921, the total number of children of immigrants was 14725 while the number of children from the General population was 14,194.⁴⁶

iii. Political Consciousness

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 collectively in the pre-Royal Commission period. In the period beginning with the 1870s, the growing economic and numeric presence of Indians in the Mauritian socio-economic realm instilled a sense of self-assurance and more importantly a very critical collective consciousness among the immigrant population. Making a constructive departure from the earlier feelings of anguish and despair, the diasporic community could progressively see a ray of hope at the end of the tunnel and began to 'perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform'.⁴⁷ 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 an equitable share in the political space. In the 1886 elections, the representation of Indian immigrants was extremely low – only 300 Indian immigrants got franchise rights despite their being 69 percent of the total population, and many of these were traders and not the descendants of the indentured labourers.⁴⁸ Indian immigrants did not voluntarily opt out of politics but they were denied participation in the political process through discrimination. There was deliberate discrimination against the Indian diaspora in granting franchise rights to its members. Owing to the morcellement process in the 1870s, many of the immigrants had acquired the property required for getting voting rights but they were debarred through

an 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 a strong racial bias against the 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.

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 the 20th century when concerted efforts were initiated by the educated sections of the Indian diaspora for greater levels of participation in the political process and significant political space.

In 1901, Mahatma Gandhi, who later rose to lead the anti-colonial mass movement in India and was accorded the towering statue of Mahatma Gandhi by the Indian people, came to Mauritius en route from South Africa to India. Mahatma Gandhi landed in Port Louis on 30th October 1901 and left on 19th November.⁴⁹ At that time, Mahatma Gandhi was fighting against the racial discrimination against 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 the Indian localities with the purpose to acquaint himself with the conditions of Indians in that colony.⁵⁰ The Indian labour diaspora, which had followed the work of Mahatma Gandhi for Indians in South Africa, was elated upon his arrival and the reception committee was set up with a leading Indian businessman Hajee Goolam Hossein as its head. He was given receptions by the Indian community⁵¹ and a huge public meeting was organised for him in Port Louis.⁵² 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 the 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 poses 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.⁵³

Despite its short duration, Mahatma Gandhi's visit had a profound symbolic impact on the Indian diaspora in Mauritius and his call for larger

political participation worked as a great stimulus to the process of their political awakening.⁵⁴ In 1901, two Indians – Ajam Bigrajee and H. Sakir were elected as Councillors.⁵⁵ The much-needed concerted direction and leadership to the naïve struggle of the Indian diasporic community for political space in Mauritius were provided by Manilal Maganlall Doctor who arrived in Mauritius on 13th October 1907.⁵⁶ 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 which 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 the 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 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.'⁵⁷

With this began his crusade against the discrimination and disabilities of the Indian diaspora in Mauritius and efforts to build political consciousness among them. To reach the wider sections of 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!!!*'⁵⁸ which asserted the main focus of Manilal's struggle – the 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.⁵⁹

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.'⁶⁰ They found that Manilal had a 'mischievous effect' on Indians and to fetter his attempts at the political mobilisation of Indian immigrants and demands for extended representation in the political system, colonial authorities decided to delegitimize Manilal's efforts. As 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.'⁶¹

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

In addition to the demands for general representation, on occasions, immigrants demanded 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.⁶² 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 King George V, urging his nomination in the Council because he was the only member of the Parsee community with so much success and thus deserved a seat.⁶³

Manilal Doctor finally left Mauritius in September 1911, but he had already instilled the consciousness for self-respect and constitutional rights among the Indian diaspora which continued to wage a struggle against oppression and demand equitable status. In the history of British Mauritius, the epoch after the 1930s ultimately witnessed the manifestation of organised political activism and collective action from the Indian labour diaspora. Several organisations started off to articulate the concerns of the population. Some of these were - Mauritius Labour Party, Mauritius Agricultural Labourers' Association, Engineering, and Technical Workers Union, the Indian Cultural Association, etc. Mauritius Labour Party was founded on 23rd February 1936 by Dr. Maurice Cure who was earlier active in the Retrocession movement but now taking up issues concerning the Indian community as well. He petitioned for their representation in the Council. One of his closest associates was Pandit Sahdeo who worked hard to mobilise support from the

Indian community for Labour Party. Two other important people who came together to join this party and added enormously to its popularity were Hurrparsing Ramnarain and Emmanuel Anquetil (deported in 1938 for his 'seditious' activities) who worked closely with the agricultural labourers and dock workers respectively. In 1939, two members from the Indian community were nominated to the Council to represent small planters and labourers.

A new constitution was framed and adopted in June 1948 which reduced the qualification for the franchise to literacy and also introduced female suffrage. Based on this constitution, general elections were held in August 1948. In this election, Labour Party won 19 seats of which the majority were of Indian origins. This election was very important for the future course of Mauritian politics in many ways. This widened the base of political participation by making it more inclusive and bringing more people into the process. This election established the Indian community at the forefront of the political scenario and settled the *mêlée* of domination over the constituency and agenda of the Labour Party in favour of leaders of Indian settlers. This also witnessed the entry of Dr. Seewoosagur Ramgoolam into the active politics that spearheaded the political movement for the independence of Mauritius. After the entry of some highly educated and articulate leaders from the Indian community like Dr. Seewoosagur Ramgoolam and A Beejadhur, who subscribed to more constitutional methods of agitation and demands of the larger community, there was a contest of hegemony going on in the Labour Party leaders with Dr. Cure on one hand and Dr. Ramgoolam on the other. It was gradually being established that Labour Party is going to be the representative political platform of the Indian labour diaspora, though there were voices of dissent as well. The Muslim population was anxious about Hindu domination and contested elections by forming a consolidation called *Comite d' Action Musalman*, leading to a communal divide in the larger community, for which the Labour Party was also responsible to a great extent because of its 'Hindu' ways of mobilisation. Post-1948 elections it became clear that Labour Party was going to dominate the political scenario of Mauritius with members of the Indian diaspora at the forefront and eventually at the time of independence, its leader Dr. Ramgoolam became the first PM.

In this paper, I have tried to ascertain the extent to which the celebratory transformation of the Indian labour diaspora can be attributed to the indenture system itself (structure) or the achievement of the diasporic aspirations and struggles (agency). At the core of this binary deliberation is the incessant debate of structure vs. agency – whether it is the structure that constrains and determines the providence of people or the people, in themselves, have the volition and capacity to achieve their aspirations and construct their worlds. Without denying the vital significance of the structure (indenture system under the aegis of the empire) for the achievements of the labour diaspora, I have tried to underline the fact that the negotiations of diaspora (agency) were very crucial in constructing the 'lands of opportunity' and reaching the zenith. I have tried to underline the very fact that in our case

there were several occasions and institutions (vagrancy) that the imperial order manipulated to restrict the progressive transformation of the Diasporic community. The beneficiaries' argument was denounced even by the later colonial officials in their reporting of the condition of Indian indentured labourers in Mauritius.⁶⁴ Though under the indenture system, immigrants got the opportunity to escape certain social-economic subjugations at home in certain ways, they were simultaneously drawn into a more ruthless structure of moral and physical domination. As Madhavi Kale puts it,

'The imperial labour relocation strategy characteristically and contradictorily made good the promise of imperial liberalism to release people from the fixities of place, custom, and birth into mobility and the opportunity to rise above their "traditional" station – into other orders of imperial hierarchy.'⁶⁵

Using the theoretical arguments of social phenomenology, this paper attempts to pose a counterfactual argument to the portrayal of the Indian labour diaspora as 'beneficiaries of empire', by emphasising the role of the diaspora in facilitating the imperial endeavours and the benefits the empire realised through the Indian labour diaspora.

Notes and References

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2. R. F. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (California: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 356,361
3. There were other streams of immigration of Indian labourers to work on plantations in Malaya, Burma, and Ceylon but as a conscious choice, I haven't discussed them in this paper and the immigrant labourers to these destinations were recruited under a different system which led to debt bondage of labour-master relationship and thus requires different analytical treatment.
4. *Report of Committee on Causes for Labour Insufficiency in Mauritius*
5. Note on Emigration to West Indies, p.8
6. *Report of Sanderson Committee*, 1910, p.1
7. *Ibid.*
8. Census, Mauritius 1921
9. *Report of Kunwar Maharaj Singh on His Deputation to Mauritius 1925*
10. Letter from Secretary of State for Colonies, *Further Papers Respecting East Indian Labourers*, 1842.
11. Parliamentary Papers III (43) 9 May 1841
12. Emmer, P.C. 'The Meek Hindu: The Recruitment of Indian Indentured Labourers for Services Overseas. 1870-1916'. In P. C. Emmer, ed., *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), p.204
13. I. M. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834-54* (London: Dowsons, 1969), p. 162
14. *Ibid.*

15. Gladstone to Glenelg dt 28 Feb 1838.
16. Patrick Beaton, *Creoles and Coolies; or, Five Years in Mauritius* (London: James Nisbet, 1858), pp.10-11
17. Old immigrants, as defined by the law, were the immigrants in Mauritius who had completed the period of their initial contract or 'industrial residence' and could move out of plantations to explore other means of sustenance.
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19. H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Import of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 118-119
20. Hugh Tinker, *New System of Slavery*; Panchanan Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour, 1834-1900* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970); and I. Chakravarty, 'Emergence of an Industrial Labour force in a Dual Economy; British India, 1880-1920', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* XV, No. 3(1978); Pradipta Chaudhuri. 'The Impact of Forced Commercialization on the Pattern of Emigration from Orissa, 1901-1921' In K.N. Raj, *Essays on the commercialization of Indian Agriculture* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985); Jan Braman and E. Valentine Daniel. 'The Making of a Coolie', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 19, Nos. 3-4, (April-July 1992) pp. 268-295. P. C. Emmer, 'The Meek Hindu: The Recruitment of Indian Indented Labourers for Service Overseas, 1870-1916' In P.C. Emmer, *Colonialism and Migration; Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986); C. Kondapi, *Indians Overseas, 1838-1949* (Delhi: OUP, 1951)
21. Saha has very eloquently linked the negative effects of British rule in India both economic and political, to the migration of Indian labourers overseas, Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour*, p. 74
22. 'They (mills of Paisley and Manchester) were created by the sacrifice of the Indian manufacturers. British goods were forced upon her without paying any duty, and the foreign manufacturer employed the arm of political injustice to keep down and ultimately strangle a competitor.' Desai, A.R. *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1976. p. 82
23. Indian Revenue Proceedings, No. 22, June 1864, cited in Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour*. p. 59
24. Collector of Godavari district to Board of Revenue. dt. 14 April 1834, cited in Dharma Kumar. *Land and Caste in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965. p. 130
25. For these unprecedented figures of emigration, Tinker (p.97) attributes to the enormous demand of Mauritian in planters for which post-1857 disruption worked only as supply factors. Saha, who otherwise attributes emigration to the negative effects of colonial rule, cites it as an incidental and indirect impetus (p. 75). Only Cumpston analyses this spurt in terms of 'British rule pushing people to emigrate', Cumpston, I.M., *Indians Overseas in British Territories*. p.66
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 31. Lal, 'Kunti's Cry' p. 57
 32. Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP), Vol. xxxv, No. 356, 1844.
 33. Census, Mauritius, 1911.
 34. I have borrowed this conceptual difference between awareness of class and class consciousness from Lukacs' analysis. See Georg, Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectic* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971).
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 43. C Kalla, a Mauritian scholar, puts it as a demand from the Muslim community. Kalla here inadvertently falls in line with the distorted explanation offered by the colonial administrators to reject the petition and it does not hold much weight as Kalla himself mentions that the petition was signed by members of the diasporic community across the religious affiliations.
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