

## Reunion Island



### I Demographic Features of the Country

This is a small island with the form of a tortoise next to the South-East of Madagascar and Mauritius. Re`union is unique since it is part of metropolitan France. It is *De`partement Outre Mer* (DOM), meaning an Overseas Department of France with its own France *pre`fet* to administer it. Like any other French prefecture, it also has its elected representatives of a central and several regional councils. This is no longer a French colony and all if its inhabitants are citizens of France. But it is interesting to note shat a France visa would not enable a foreign national to visit this island. French consular officers all over the world are still required to obtain a separate authorization from Paris to facilitate such visits.

The Reunionese population is multi-racial and is composed of several ethnic groups. The main three large ethnic groups are:

- The Whites, among them those belonging to the white bourgeoisie, called "les Gros-Blancs"; and those who live in the mountains, they are more numerous in the south area;
- The Blacks, whose origins are Africa (Cafres) and Madagascar;

- The Indians from Dravidian origins (known as Malbar).

The main towns of the island are: Saint-André situated in the East; then Saint-Benoit, Saint-Pierre, Saint-Louis, Tampon in the South; and at last, Saint-Paul and le Port in the West of the island. Saint-Denis, the capital of the island, has about 121,000 dwellers.

**Capital:** Saint-Denis

**Population** 787,584

Language: French and Creole (most people speak this)

**Age Structure**

0-14	years:	29.8%	(male	120,147/female	114,589)
15-64	years:	64%	(male	248,895/female	255,156)
65 years and over: 6.2% (male 19,847/female 28,950) (2006 est.)					

**Ethnic Group:** French, African, Malagasy, Chinese, Pakistani, Indian

**Religion:** Roman Catholic 86%, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist

**Economy:**

The economy has traditionally been based on agriculture, but services now dominate. Sugarcane has been the primary crop for more than a century, and in some years it accounts for 85% of exports. The government has been pushing the development of a tourist industry to relieve high unemployment, which amounts to one-third of the labor force. The gap in Reunion between the well-off and the poor is extraordinary and accounts for the persistent social tensions. The white and Indian communities are substantially better off than other segments of the population, often approaching European standards, whereas minority groups suffer the poverty and unemployment typical of the poorer nations of the African continent. The outbreak of severe rioting in February 1991 illustrated the seriousness of socioeconomic tensions. The economic well-being of Reunion depends heavily on continued financial assistance from France.

**Labour Force Participation:** agriculture 13%, industry 12%, services 75% (2000)

## **II Indian Diaspora**

### **1. Demography features of Indian Diaspora**

It is forbidden in Reunion Island to make the censuses of the population based on ethnic criteria. It is thus difficult to know the number of Indians (including those of mixed-race) living in the island. It is estimated that *Malbars* (or *Malabars*) represent 25% of the population. They are descended from the Indian workers imported to Reunion after the abolition of slavery. Most of these workers came from Calcutta and the Coast of Coromandel, where the former French counters Madras, Pondichéry, Karikal and Mahé are located. About 85,000 Indians were brought to Reunion and 25,000 of them eventually stayed on the island.

The *Zarabes* (a local form of the French *les Arabes*) represent 2% of the population. They are descended from the Muslim Indians imported in the XIXth century.

### **2. Geographical Spread of the Indian Diaspora**

It is a small island so widely spread around business centers.

### **3. Brief history of Migration**

Reunion Island had no indigenous people before the arrival of the first settlers less than 300 years ago. The French people were present at the beginning of the settlement of Reunion Island. New settlers from all over the world, that is from Madagascar, Europe, Africa and Asia, immigrate to the island. The French cultural influence remains very strong.

The French started the colonization of Reunion as long ago as 1646. Initially it was all man-group then they imported some women from Goa, a course of time, sizable Indian community grew. After abolition of slavery in 1848, they started to recruit indentured labour from India to work in sugarcane plantations, since they had colony in Pondicherry as its main base around this areas. Though catchment' area was limited, they signed a convention with British on 25 July 1860 which allowed 6000 Indian laborers to be recruited annually for work in Reunion under the indenture system. Between 1848 and 1860, about 37,777 Indian were inducted for a period to five years. Most of the indentured labor was from Tamilnadu. Around 1850, Second wave of migration started from Gujarat region who went to Island voluntarily. They were about 40,000 persons consisted of merchants, traders and artisans. The migration of these persons was similar to that of the 'passenger Indians' who were setting out for South Africa around the same time. Upon migration, Muslims migrants set up various commercial enterprise, the Hindus appear to have had in their midst a large number of jewelers, among whom the Patair family appears to have been the foremost.

#### **4. Profile of Indian Diaspora:**

Indians are all over in Reunion and acquired high position in the society in sector like academia, civil servants, and business. They have all civil, social and political right.

#### **5. Known Distinguished Diaspora:**

- Mr Jean Paul Virapouille is a Mayor of Saint Andre and first Vice president of the General Council of Reunion and PBS-2006 awardees.
- Mr Saminadin Axel Kichenin and Mr Nadia Ramassamy.
- Mrs Denise Nilameyom a Deputy Mayor of Tampon.

## **6. Concerns and Problems of Indian Diaspora**

- PIO from this country want to have strong and sustainable cultural linkages with their ancestral home. They have demanded a Cultural centre on the line of Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre established in Mauritius.
- Initiatives to preserve Indian languages.

## **7. Diaspora Relations**

Indians are in majority in this country and are citizen of France (Reunion). They do not have any problem since all citizens were migrants and Indians were the first one to arrive in this inhabitant land in early 18 the century.

## **8. Local Laws**

Not known

## **9. Major Diaspora Associations**

There are some cultural associations which is trying to preserve Indian tradition and cultural among new generation. Apart from this, GOPIO has a chapter in the country.