

Réunion



Grande Chaloupe Lazaret, St. Denis (Réunion), the site where the indentured Indians were kept in quarantine after their arrival and before they were sent to work on sugarcane plantations.

The English translation of the inscription on the plaque is as under:

*HOMAGE
On this Thursday, 30th
October, 1997
Day of Dipavali,
we bring the light to the
first engaged
Indians who died at
this site.*

Tamij Sangam



Temple Pandiale du Colosse (Draupadi Temple), Saint Andre, Réunion

Réunion has the unusual distinction of having been known by different names at different times in its chequered history. During the colonial period, it was initially called ‘Mascarene’ in honour of a Portuguese explorer named Pedro Mascarenhas. He was the first European to have ‘discovered’ it during the early 16th century. In later years it became, successively, the ‘Ile Bourbon’ or ‘Ile Bonaparte’, depending on the current political regime in France, the colonial power that had occupied it in 1640. Unlike in the case of Mauritius, at the end of the Napoleonic wars, the victorious British occupied the island for only five years and then gave it back to France! It was the latter who eventually gave it its present name.

- 6.2. Réunion is also unique in that it is now technically part of metropolitan France. It is a *Département Outre Mer (DOM)*, meaning an Overseas Department of France with its own French *préfet* to administer it. Like any other French prefecture, it also has its elected representatives of a central and several regional councils. Thus it is no longer a French ‘colony’ and all of its inhabitants are citizens of France. But it is interesting to note that a French 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 authorisation from Paris to facilitate such visits.
- 6.3. This chapter will start with an examination of how and why an Indian presence was first introduced into this tiny Indian Ocean island, which is more than 4,000 kms. from Mumbai and only a comparatively short distance away from the African mainland. The next section will deal with the growth and evolution of the Indian community in Réunion. The final part of this chapter will describe the present status of the PIOs and their recent attempts to explore their roots. They appear to have undertaken this task with a view to reasserting their Indian ancestry in an official milieu that, unlike in the colonial period, has become more tolerant of religious and cultural diversities. Embarking on such a cultural renaissance, many members of the Indian community have made known their desire to see a responsive and co-operative attitude on the part of their ‘mother country’ to their diverse demands and expectations from it. An attempt has been made to catalogue their aspirations in the concluding part of this chapter.

Genesis of the Indian Presence in Réunion

- 6.4. The French started the colonisation of Réunion as long ago as 1646, when a dozen or so adventurers

volunteered to go there. Legend has it that this all-male group soon imported some women from Goa and, in course of time, a small foundation had been laid for the future, sizeable Indian presence on the island. Whatever the truth or otherwise of this belief, history books record only that the colonists were able to acquire a large number of African slaves, whether from Madagascar or the African mainland, to work on the coffee plantations that were being set up in 1715. When a cyclone destroyed the coffee fields in the early 19th century, the planters turned to sugar cane, which soon became the primary cash crop on the island. By the time France abolished slavery in 1848, the population of Réunion had grown to over 100,000. Out of that number, some 62,000 were African slaves. Fearing disruption of the plantation economy, some of the planters persuaded their former slaves, with sweet words and other inducements, to continue working with them. But more than 35,000 of the former slaves decided to celebrate their newly decreed freedom by deserting their former masters.

- 6.5. As in the case of the British colonies, the French settlers thereupon decided to recruit indentured labour from abroad. Their preferred source was India, where they had already set up a small colonial empire with Pondicherry as its main base. As the supply from this limited area was not sufficient to meet their growing needs, they entered into protracted negotiations with the British to recruit labour from British India. On 25 July 1860 a Franco-British Convention was signed in Paris, which allowed 6,000 Indian labourers to be recruited annually for work in Réunion under the indenture system. With the success of these negotiations began the sordid tale of recruiting thousands of Indians, as well as some other nationals. A time span of five years was fixed as the contractual period. It was agreed that after the expiry of that term, a return passage would be provided. There were also provisions to protect the labourers against ill treatment. Between 1848 and 1860, no less than 37,777 Indians, 26,748 Africans and 423 Chinese had been inducted in this manner – for a period of five years in the case of Indians and Chinese; for ten in the case of Africans.
- 6.6. Most of the Indian indentured workers were from the region in and around what is now Tamil Nadu. The official view was that they had voluntarily tried to escape from difficult conditions at home. Whatever the truth of that assertion, it was a grim fact that what they were going to face in Réunion was not going to be very much better.
- 6.7. Around 1850, there was a parallel stream of voluntary migrations to the island. Numbering around 40,000 persons, they consisted of merchants, traders and artisans from Gujarat. Most of them appear to have been Muslims, though not all of them. The migration of these persons was similar to that of the ‘passenger Indians’ who were setting out for South Africa around the same time. With their business acumen and their better educational background, they were able to settle down quickly in their new country to pursue their respective vocations. While the Muslims migrants set up various commercial enterprises, the Hindus appear to have had in their midst a large number of jewellers, among whom the Patair family appears to have been the foremost.

Growth and Evolution of the Indian Community

- 6.8. During the 19th century and until the First World War, the Indian immigrants were considered merely as foreign workers. They had few or no civic rights and the colonial government was not particularly interested in their welfare. Only after 1920 were they granted French nationality. The proclamation of Réunion as an Overseas Department of France in 1946 meant equal opportunities for the Indian migrants in various fields, including education, business, and even participation in the civic administration of towns and cities, besides eligibility for election to the House of Deputies in Paris. With the granting of these fundamental rights, they had become full-fledged French citizens. This meant that they could now participate in all avenues of life, in the same way as the indigenous French nationals on the island.
- 6.9. In the decades after 1920, the PIOs profited from their enhanced civic and political status to try and reconstruct their shattered lives. They also wanted to fathom the full meaning and significance of their newly acquired 'Indo-French identity'.
- 6.10. Meanwhile, another new phase had been heralded in their lives with the independence of India in 1947. This marked a revival in them of their sub-conscious and deep-seated Indianness. The era of empires and colonial domination was fast being replaced all over Africa and Asia by the dawn of independence in one country after another. Even their closest neighbour, Mauritius, was soon to attain freedom. The PIOs of Réunion did not aspire to see a similar transformation in their island home, as they had become equal citizens of metropolitan France. Nevertheless, there was a gradual awakening in them of their Indian origin and a desire to revive their ancient culture, or at least to enrich the local scene with the special traits of their inheritance. They also now wanted to translate their newly acquired civic and political rights into a gradual and increasing participation in local and other elections. Mr Jean Paul Virapouille is a fine example of PIO participation in the island's civic and political life. He is currently Mayor of Saint André and First Vice President of the General Council of Réunion. There are other examples also of this kind, such as those of Mr Saminadin Axel Kichenin and Mrs Nadia Ramassamy who are, respectively, Second and Third Vice Presidents of the same General Council, while Mrs Denise Nilameyom is Deputy Mayor of Tampon.
- 6.11. The High Level Committee was able to witness the manifestation of this new sentiment when, during its brief visit to Réunion, we were taken to see the place where the first Indian indentured labourers had been landed on the island, at La Grande Chaloupe. We learned there that on 13 April last year, the *Tamij Sangam* had marked the anniversary of that historic occasion. At that memorial meeting, many speakers had recalled with great emotion how their ancestors had embarked on their long voyage to the island with dreams of a better life ahead of them. But soon the voyage itself had turned into a nightmare. It was much longer than what they had been lead to believe. They had been piled one on top of the other on the open deck. With the unhygienic conditions on board, total absence of medical assistance, and lack of nourishing food, many of them had suffered grievously and the weaker ones had died before arriving at their destination.

As for the others, they were put up in barracks at a place called *Le Lazaret*, which is literally the French word for a hospital or pest house, from there to be released, after the stipulated period of quarantine, to the tender mercies of their future masters. The *Tamij Sangam* has decided to mark this anniversary every year and also to maintain respectfully the much-neglected graves where their ancestors had been hurriedly buried when their dead bodies arrived on the island.

The Present Status of the PIOs

- 6.12. 'Malabar' is a generic term used for all Indians from South India. Tamils constitute the largest group among the Indian community. The HLC was informed that, as per figures estimated in March 1999, they number approximately 180,000 which is a little over 25% of the country's total population of 709,468. Their main occupation is agriculture. Except for the Muslims who came to the island from Gujarat, all the other Indians had been routinely categorised as Catholics, more or less by force. Many of them appear to have been converted to that faith during the indenture period. In recent years, however, there has been a revival of Hinduism among members of the Tamil community. This has led to the establishment of many temples and *ashrams*. An interesting feature, peculiar to Réunion, is the simultaneous observance by some of them of Catholic and Hindu rites, a practice that has earned them the sobriquet of being 'socially catholic and privately Hindu'. A generous local explanation of this phenomenon is that 'it is a manifestation of the Hindu religion, which is tolerant of other religions and has the capacity to co-exist with them'.
- 6.13. Reference has already been made earlier in this chapter to the 40,000 Muslim and Hindu PIOs from Gujarat. When Pondicherry became part of the Indian Union in 1958, France offered its citizenship to all the residents of this former French colony. Not all of them responded to this offer. While some decided to migrate to France, others preferred to go to Réunion, possibly because of its proximity to India and also because of its balmy weather. At present, there are about 150 families of Pondicherrian origin in the island. Most of them have joined the island's civil services.
- 6.14. There are about 60 Indian nationals in Réunion. Construction workers imported from India have built almost a dozen Hindu temples on the island. The HLC visited the oldest among them. It had an impressive structure. An interesting feature of that temple was that one of its many parts honoured Arjuna and Draupadi. There are also several privately maintained shrines in Réunion, dedicated mostly to Shiva. A number of spiritual teachers have been invited by the PIOs over the years to make the island their permanent home and guide interested persons in the tenets of Hinduism. Among them are the Swamis Advyananda at the *Arsha Vidya Ashram*, Premanand Puri at the *Maison de L'Inde*, Pranavananda at the Chinmaya Mission and Nilamegame at the *Maison Sérénité*.
- 6.15. Even some cooks have come from India to man the local Indian restaurants and provide the PIOs with authentic Indian culinary delicacies.

- 6.16. The Indian community is very active in promoting Indian culture, if only for their own satisfaction and enjoyment. Several PIO associations are enthusiastically engaged in sponsoring cultural programmes of Indian dance and music, painting and literature. Among them, the prominent ones are Natyakalamai, Oubasanaa, Saraswati, Shakti, Shruti and Vanni. They have invited a number of Indian artistes from time to time to stage concerts before appreciative local audiences. We were overwhelmed to witness a Bharat Natyam performance in our honour by students of Leela Armoudam, a student and admirer of Leela Samson. Children trained by another local teacher, Linda Sellom, gave a creditable rendition of Mohini Attam at the same function.
- 6.17. Tamil New Year, Deepavali and Navratras are celebrated with enthusiasm and serenity on an elaborate scale all over the Island. Eid is also celebrated in a befitting manner. The local authorities including the Office of the *Prefet*, the Departmental Office of Culture, the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs, the Regional Council, the General Council and the various municipalities extend financial as well as logistic support for these PIO activities. The National Conservatory of Réunion teaches Indian music and dance. From time to time, the Cultural Intervention Centre of Saint André itself organises Indian cultural programmes.
- 6.18. A majority of the Indian community appears to have utilised the available opportunities for education. They have easy access to all the local educational institutions to study and pursue their academic career. Such facilities are available to them for primary, secondary (known as colleges), senior secondary (known as Lycee) and university level education. In some schools Tamil is taught as an optional language.
- 6.19. We were happy to learn from the Consul General that the PIOs - a community consisting of agriculturists, businessmen, and academics, civil servants and politicians - are well established on the island. They carry on their respective occupations without any undue interference from the local authorities. They have apparently been contributing effectively to the overall development of the island, with a cordial and friendly relationship with the rest of the population.
- 6.20. From its reactions with officials of the local administration, the HLC could observe for itself that the Indian community in Réunion is held in high esteem and is well integrated into the mainstream of the local society, of which it has become an integral part. The different elements of the PIO community - Hindus, Muslims and Christians - live in close harmony and have no differences whatsoever on account of their religious or regional origin.

Demands and Expectations of the Diaspora

- 6.21. In general, it may be observed that the PIOs in this island have mainly educational and cultural expectations from India. The following are some of the issues in which they would be appreciative of a positive Indian response:

- (1) The French Embassy in New Delhi and the Consulate General of France in Pondicherry sometimes delay the issue of visas to Indian artistes who are invited by the PIOs or PIO associations in Réunion to participate in cultural activities organised by them on the island. It would be helpful if the concerned authorities could be persuaded to expedite the disposal of such visa applications.
- (2) A large number of PIOs in Réunion are enthusiastically engaged in promoting Indian culture on the island. It would encourage them greatly if an Indian Cultural Centre could be set up here, to undertake the various kinds of programmes that the Centre in Mauritius is currently engaged in. This suggestion should be considered favourably, irrespective of the 'House of Civilisations' project which is under the active consideration of the Regional Council of Réunion.
- (3) Similarly, an institution like the Indira Gandhi Centre for Indian Culture in Mauritius should be set up here to promote the teaching of Indian languages like Tamil and Hindi, as well as Indian history and philosophy.
- (4) Indian television programmes should be telecast on the local TV channels, namely, Tele Réunion RFO, Tempo RFO and Antenne. The current practice of viewing them through the South African channels is very extensive.
- (5) The University of Réunion currently has an exchange programme with the University of Pondicherry. Similar links should be established with the Universities of Chennai and Bangalore.
- (6) The Government of France should be requested to facilitate the establishment of a suitable agency in Réunion to process requests for adoption of children from India by childless local PIO parents. Such an agency exists in France but not on this island.
- (7) The local cities of Saint Denis and Saint Pierre should be twinned with Chennai and Pondicherry respectively.
- (8) Musical instruments should be gifted to some of the PIO associations in Réunion.
- (9) A grant should be given to promote the development of the site at La Grande Chaloupe.
- (10) Grant of financial assistance in the publication in French of selected religious books and works of noted Indian scholars should be made.

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