

First International Tamil Conference - Seminar

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

18 - 23 April 1966

A Brief History of the Tamils of Mauritius

M. Sangeelee

[see also Tamils: a Trans State Nation - Mauritius]

Mauritius is a small island lost in the Indian Ocean. It is some 550 miles to the east of Madagascar. It is 31 miles long and 28 miles broad and has an area of 720 sq. miles.

It was first discovered in 1507 by the Portuguese, who gave it the name of Cirne. When the Portuguese abandoned it, the Dutch came and settled here in 1598. They too finally abandoned it in 1710. In 1715 the French took possession of it and gave it the name of Ile de France. It was under their administration that the country began to develop.

The French governor Labourdonnais introduced from India, sugar cane, which is now the main crop. He also brought from Pondichery a number of artisans, especially joiners and masons, to teach the crafts to the Mauritians, who were then mainly slaves from Africa. Fine pieces of furniture made by those Indian craftsmen still exist. Some of which are on exhibition at the Naval Museum at Mahebourg.

In 1810 the English took the Island after a fierce naval battle. In this battle a good many Tamil soldiers fought with the English. Ever since then the Island has been a British Colony.

It appears that during the French occupation, there was a considerable number of Tamils here and that they played an important part in the economic life of the country. This is evident from the fact that one or two French newspapers of the time published in Tamil, accounts of important events and advertisements, especially auction sales. We infer from the above that among those Tamils, there were many traders and well-to-do people.

After 1810 other traders came from South India, many of whom settled here. As they came single, many of them had concubines of African origin or among the French-African hybrids. A good percentage of the present creole population are composed of the descendants of those Tamils.

IMMIGRATION.

After the abolition of slavery in 1834, the emancipated slaves refused to work on the sugar plantations of their erstwhile masters. The sugar industry was, therefore, faced with a serious labour problem which threatened the very existence of the industry. The estate owners, all of French descent, viewed the

situation with grave concern and looked up to India for help. India agreed to send her sons here to save the country from ruin. Indentured labourers soon arrived, who not only averted the catastrophe, but also proved to be the architects of their masters' rapid prosperity. For this signal service, the reward they received from those masters was the most cruel treatment. The poor Indians had no one to take up their defence.

It was at that critical time that a Pole, by name De Plevitz, feeling for the defenceless Indians, started an agitation in their favour. Of course, the white estate owners resented it and subjected De Plevitz to severe ill-treatment. De Plevitz addressed a petition to the governor on behalf of Indians, but as he hardly knew English, the petition was drafted, both in English and Tamil by one Rajarethinum Modeliar.

As the first batch of immigrants came from the Malabar coast, the Indians, in general, came to be called malabars, as they still are in the neighbouring French island of Reunion (formerly Bourbon).

As the labourer's work, though the noblest, in foolishly considered humble, the appellation came to acquire a pejorative meaning. The Indians resented it so much that it had in course of time to be given up.

According to statistics, the first batch of Indian labourers arrived in 1835, but in fact, a batch of 100 coolies had been introduced six years before, in 1829.

We have already said that the Indian labourers were subjected to harsh treatment by their white masters. De Plevitz's campaign, though it did some good, did not mitigate to an appreciable degree the sufferings of those useful workers.

In 1901 Mahatma Gandhi paid a short visit to Mauritius. His heart bled at the sight of so much misery and he thought that someone should be sent over, from India to help those defenceless creatures. He could not find a suitable man immediately, but in 1907, he came across a young and dynamic barrister, Manilall Doctor, who was willing to undertake that hard job. By his intelligence and courage, and upheld by his genuine love for his humble and oppressed brothers, he succeeded after several years of hard work, in remedying most of the ills which had so long prevailed.

When Mahatma Gandhi visited the Island in 1901, the only two advanced Indian communities were the Tamil and the Muslim communities. It was the prominent members of these two communities who entertained him.

When Manilall Doctor came in 1907, he found all his helpers and friends in the Tamil community only. The calcutees or bihari community had not yet started its evolution. They were all labourers on the sugar estates.

In the early days, when oppression was at its highest point, those who dared put up a fight were Tamilians. The greatest among them was no doubt Mr. Sinnatambou. He was a wealthy man and could have greatly profited by courting the whites, but there was in him such nobility of character that he would sooner have given up all his wealth than let down his suffering brothers. Among the many things achieved by him, let us quote the following:

In those days, the Indian immigrants had no right to travel from any one place to any other without a "pass" about them.

Sinnatambou had had a temple built at Terre Rouge. Though it is now over a century since that temple was built. it is still called after him "l'eglise Sinnatambou".

On the consecration day, Indian labourers came from all parts of the Island to attend the sacred function. While the puja was going on, the police burst into the temple and arrested those who were not in possession of their "passes".

Sinnathambou petitioned the governor, complaining of the outrageous conduct of the police and asking that it should be provided in the law that temples should be respected. The governor, finding that the Indians' grievance was grounded, issued orders that thenceforward the police should not enter any temple to arrest people. To complain of the police in those days was an act of daring especially for an Indian. Only a man of the calibre of Sinnatambou could be that bold.

Before 1834, came to Mauritius Dr. Malayappen Sinnappilay. Though he was of an Indian university, he was at first allowed to practise without any restriction, but after some time, he was asked to restrict his practice to the Indian community.

Of all the Indian immigrants, the Tamils were the most cultured. They knew their language, some of them being scholars in it. Many had a knowledge of English too, and many others were well versed in their literature and music. This is borne out by the fact that they were great amateurs of drama. They staged, generally under a pandul, such plays as Harischandra, Damayanti, Savitri, Markandeya, Nallatungal, Nandanar, and excerpts from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

There were among them great musicians, perfectly familiar with the intricacies of carnatic music.

Those Tamils were very religious. They built temples everywhere, so that to-day, though the Tamil population is smaller than the calcuttees population, Tamil temples greatly outnumber those of the Calcutteas, which are of recent times, the oldest being about 50 years old, while several Tamil temples are over a century old; for example, the beautiful temple at Clementia, which was built in 1856.

Those Tamil immigrants were greatly appreciated as workers. They were not only laborious, but also intelligent. It is to their credit that a Commission of Enquiry appointed in 1845 stated in its report that of all the Indian labourers, the Tamils were the best workers.

No wonder, then. that they were better considered and given jobs where diligence, trustworthiness, and intelligence were needed, such as: sirdar, messenger, coach-man, boilers etc.

EDUCATION.

As far back as the beginning of the 19th Century, Tamils were proving themselves useful in the field of Education.

At that period the eastern suburb of Port Louis was inhabited almost entirely by Tamilians. This fact accounts for so many of the streets of that region bearing Tamil names. The following are a few: Paliaca (Paleyagar), Inapatnam. and Velore, which received their names after 1829. All the other names were given prior to 1828: Madras, Karekal, Calicut, Madurai, Mysore, Tranquebar (Tarangumbadi), Trichnapoly, Malabar.

By the year 1833, a good many people of the coloured population had come to live in that part of Port Louis. Owing to some preposterous idea, the children of these people could not find admission to the Royal College, which was then in Port Louis and could not, therefore, receive secondary education. Mr. Michel Francois Savrimoutou, one of the leading Tamils of the time, founded for them the "Colonial Academy". That school proved so successful that in 1808, he founded the Colonial Mechanic Institute for the same people.

Greater attention was paid at that time to Tamil by the Government than is now, so much so that it was one of the subjects for the Teachers' Certificate examinations.

In the year 1887, the Tamil syllabuses for these examination were:-

Monitor's Certificate examination: Grammar, reading, conversation, dictation, essay, translation.

Text books. 2nd & 3rd readers, Pope's Tamil Grammar Pt. I. Third Class Teachers' Certificate examination: Reading, conversation, essay, translation.

Text books: 4th reader, Natural History, Pope's Tamil Grammar, Pt. II, Pancha Tantram, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd parts, Nannool (1st part, up to page 61).

Second Class Teacher's Certificate examination: Grammar, conversation, essay, translation.

Text books: Pancha Tantram and Nannool (whole books).

It seems that some of the immigrants gave a serious attention to the education of their children. In the 1864 Monitor's Certificate examinations, a fourteen year old boy, named Tamby Narayanan, topped the list of successful candidates.

The old immigrants, who had a thorough knowledge of Tamil, passed it on to their children. As many of their offspring of the second, and a greater number still of the third generation had started learning English and French, their Tamil education was, bit by bit, neglected.

Finding themselves all the time in an environment where the language they heard and spoke was Creole, a corrupt form of French, most of those of the succeeding generations who lived in towns soon stopped speaking Tamil and spoke Creole only.

The succeeding batches of immigrants came from Bihar and other Hindi-speaking places. The time, therefore, soon came when those known as calcutteas outnumbered the Tamils. Those Tamils who lived on sugar estates, finding themselves in Hindi-speaking environments, soon began to speak Hindi even at home. But unlike the town Tamilians, they kept up their mother tongue as well.

Tamil had moved far downhill when, at the beginning of this century, a Madras regiment was stationed in the Island. Since the capture of the Colony by the English in 1810 and until recently Indian regiments had constantly been stationed here for its defence. In that Madras regiment was a soldier named Tulasinga Navalar, a scholar in Tamil. He taught the language to a few young men, some of whom became very proficient in it.

Mr. Perumal Soobrayan, the brightest figure in the history of Tamil literature in Mauritius was one of them. He was a poet and a brilliant orator. He translated into Tamil a French novel entitled *Ravengar*, by Guy de Terramond and wrote a booklet of verse entitled: "Contemplation Songs", to which the late Kalyana Soondara Moodeliar prefaced in glowing terms. He wrote a drama in verse, many other poems and a number of satires, which he never cared to collect in book form. He was poor, very poor at times, but he nevertheless managed to work for the propagation of Tamil. For many years, he ran single-handed four free Tamil schools, teaching therein personally. He has left a few bright pupils, the foremost of them being Rajarethinum Sangeelee. Two other bright pupils of Tulasinga Navalar were Saoundarajan and K. Raman.

Of the contemporary Tamils who are proficient in Tamil may be mentioned: Soopaya Modeliar, Vele Govinden, Vadevel Selven, the Sangeelee brothers and P. Arunachalum.

Soopaya Modeliar and the Sangeelee brothers have for years been devoting much of their time to teaching Tamil, gratis.

It was feared until recently that Tamil would soon become extinct in Mauritius, but luckily there has been, since the last decade, a revival of the language. The interest which the Tamils are now taking in it and in their culture make one hopeful of better days for our mother tongue.

Tamil was, until 1950, taught in only two schools. It was then introduced into sixteen more schools. About 1958, when the Honourable Runganathan Seeneevassen was Minister of Education, it was extended to many more schools, and our present Minister, the Honourable Veerasamy Ringadoo, has brought the number of schools where Tamil is taught to its maximum.

Besides, free Tamil Schools have been opened in very many places by Tamil associations or single individuals. Many of the teachers of these schools are volunteers, others content themselves with a nominal pay, considering their work as a contribution to the advancement of the community.

Now, Tamil is taught in the primary schools only. We hope that the time is not far when it will find its place in the syllabuses of the secondary schools as well.

The Tamil language has had a considerable influence on the Creole language. Many Tamil words have found their way into that language. The following are a few -

Names of plants: Kali, from Kalli, Notchi, Mourouk (Muruku). vetivert from vettiver

Names of fruits att, from atta, goyave from Koyyu .

Names of vegetables: pipangaye from peerkanggaye, patol, from pudol, mourroung, from mouroungay; avrayka, from avaraykaye; Kotaranga, from Kottuvarangaye; Kotomili, from Kottumalli; Karoupillay, from Karuvepillay; pudina, from pudiyana; Betel, from vettrilaye ; pak, from paku; elyeti, from elarisi .

Names of cakes: putu, from pittu ; ounday. from ourounday; Mourkou, from mouroukkou.

And the exclamation: "Ayo!" from ayyo .

Besides, the diet of all the communities is mostly Tamil. Rice has become the staple food. Curries especially fish and meat. are prepared in the Tamil way, with masala.

In 1922, the Government decided to have a Police Band, but suitable musicians could not be found in the country. Governor Sir Kisketh Bell brought in 27 musicians from South India, mostly from Travancore. These musicians trained some Mauritians who, little by little, replaced them, till the whole band became Mauritian.

Many of our young people are taking a keen interest in Tamil music, both vocal and instrumental. Some of them are gifted and could become expert singers or musicians, if they had proper guidance.

Some of our girls are showing great interest in classical dance, especially "baratha natyam", but they can't improve for lack of guidance. An effort is being made to obtain such guidance from India.

The Tamils of Mauritius are utilising as best they can, the talents they possess. With the help of these talents they are now and then giving dramatic and musical performances on the local radio and T.V. Tamil plays are staged. On two occasions the Bharati Tamil School gave concerts of Tamil music, which were greatly appreciated. Some Frenchman, who happened to be in the country at the time, attended and subsequently wrote eulogistically about them.

ECONOMY.

Among the Tamils who came from India were some very wealthy men. Of them, V. Annasamy who, before 1826, became owner of the Bon Espoir Sugar Estate' which covers an area of 770 arpents with a sugar factory. In 1852, he sold it to Rama Tirumoodu Chetty, who kept it until 1914

Up to the end of the last century, and even during the first quarter of the present one, the Tamil community was very prosperous in Mauritius. They owned a large number of houses and commercial buildings everywhere but especially in Port Louis and Rose Hill. Trade was almost entirely in their hands.

In the Central Market, all the sections, the meat and fish sections, excepted, were entirely occupied by Tamilians.

Then began the downward march, which was rapid enough and was brought about by a severe competition from Chinese traders.

POLITICS.

In politics Tamils are playing an honourable part. Prior to 1886, the Indians had no representations in the Legislative Council. In that year, Mr. Gnanadirayen Arlanda, a merchant, was nominated. He was later on succeeded by Dr. Xavier Nalletamby, who, in his turn was succeeded by Mr. Kistnasamy Narainsamy, a custom-house broker, up to 1910.

It is since 1948. that Tamils have begun to play an active part in politics. In that year, a Tamilian was, for the first time, elected to the Legislative Council. He was Ranganathan Seeneevassen, one of the most brilliant barristers the Island has produced. He was a very eloquent speaker and a shrewd politician. He was, in fact. the brain of the Labour Party, to which he belonged. His premature death deprived the community of its glory and the country of an invaluable asset.

In 1953. R. Seeneevassen, Veerasamy Ringadoo, Francis Soocramanien Chadien and Goinsamy Venkatasamy were elected. Or' succeeding elections, Messrs Vele Govinden, and Kistnasamy Tiruvengadam were returned.

The Tamils now sitting in the Legislative Assembly are: Veerasamy Ringadoo, Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs, Kristnasamy Tirvengadam, Minister of State for the budget, Vele Govinden, elected member. and Kistnasamy Sunassee' nominated member. The latter deserves a special mention. He is a successful merchant and a great philanthropist. For the last two decades. at least, he has been taking a leading part in the affairs of the community. He is ever prepared for any sacrifice, however great of time, energy and money, when the community is concerned. Whenever a movement is set afoot in the

interest of the community. Sunassee is sure to be there. Unlike many others, he does not act for show, but works with genuine sincerity.

Besides, several other Tamils have recently had the honour of being elected presidents of Town Councils. Last year Mr. K. Chinnasamy was elected president of the township of Vacoas-Phoenix and this year Mr. Satchuda Patten is President of Beau-Bassin-Rose Hill. The greatest honour to the community is that this year's Mayor of Port Louis is a Tamilian. He is Mr. Dorsamy Moorghen.

In the Civil Service, many Tamils have acceded to high posts, four of them having reached the grade of Principa] Assistant Secretaries in various Ministries.

Our community has a good number of doctors and barristers - and two magistrates. The only lady barrister of the Colony is a Tamilian: Mrs. Laure Pillay.

RELIGION.

Though a certain number of Tamilians, about 12% belongs to the Christian faith, the big majority are Hindus. They have 120 temples, which have grouped themselves into a federation, which receives the Tamilians' share of the Religious subsidy paid by Government and distributes it among the temples.

The Hindu Tamils observe the Cavadee festival and many temples hold "walk on fire".

Four of the Tamil festivals are public holidays, viz. Pongal Deepavali, Cavadee and Shivaratri.

Many Tamil associations exist, some of which are very active and are doing fine work. The Tamil League, for example, has a number of activities: scouting and drama, especially.

The 2nd Tamil Scouts have, for a number of years successively won the first prize at the annual Drama Competition.

Tiruvalluvar and Bharati Days are observed in several places every year.

Our ladies are not lagging behind. Ladies' associations have been formed in many towns and villages and are very active. They are running schools and classes in needlework, painting. etc. They also hold celebrations of our principal festivals.

Four of our girls have so far been laureates. winning the English Scholarships. Three have already completed their studies in the U.K. Two are doctors in the Government Service. The third has taken a degree and is a tutor in the Teachers' Training College. The fourth has won a scholarship this year.

Our ladies do not lack courage either. Some years ago, the labourers of Belle Vue Sugar Estate went on strike. Matters came to such a pass that the police opened fire, some say unnecessarily, and Anjelay, a Tamil lady, who was among the leaders, was shot dead. Mr. Permal Subrayen wrote a fine poem in Tamil in her honour. That poem has been translated into English.

We have now two newspapers, edited in English, French and Tamil. One of them, Tamil Voice is doing good work in the field of language and culture. It has already published a Tamil Course through French and has been, almost from the start, publishing a series of articles on Tamil culture. It is becoming more and more popular.

It is hoped that the Tamil community will move from progress to progress and that, in the years to come, it will play an important part in making Mauritius prosperous and great.

In the compilation of this paper, much information has been obtained from A. Beejadhli's book: Les Indiens a l'Île Maurice and Prof. Bissoodoyal's booklet: A Short History of the Tamils of Mauritius.

Mail Us - truth is a pathless land - Home

Source : <http://tamilnation.co/conferences/cnfMA66/mauritius.htm>