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► **To cite this version:**

Esther Hanoomanjee. Ethnicity and social policy in multiracial mauritius. Kabaro, revue internationale des Sciences de l'Homme et des Sociétés, 2008, Interethnicité et Interculturalité à l'île Maurice, IV (4-5), pp.105-118. <hal-03484896>

HAL Id: hal-03484896

<https://univ-reunion.hal.science/hal-03484896v1>

Submitted on 17 Dec 2021

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ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL POLICY IN MULTIRACIAL MAURITIUS

ESTHER HANOOMANJEE¹

Résumé

Cet article définit les termes d'ethnicité, race et nationalité dans le contexte mauricien. Comme Maurice est un petit état insulaire et a une économie vulnérable, le gouvernement essaie de garder la paix entre les communautés sans freiner le développement du secteur privé. Les facteurs qui ont aidé ce développement sont décrits dans cette contribution.

Mots-clés : ethnicité, race, nationalité, économie mauricienne

Abstract

This paper describes the terms of ethnicity, race and nationality and applies them to the Mauritian context. As a small multi racial island economy, government policies to manage the economy have been important in ensuing peace between the different communities while leaving the economy open for the development of a vibrant private sector. Important factors which have contributed to this development have been highlighted.

Keywords : ethnicity, race, nationality, mauritian economy

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the two main concepts of race and ethnicity in the context of the socio economic development of Mauritius — a small multi racial island economy off the coast of Madagascar. The island belongs to the African political grouping while being at the same time closely linked ethnically with France, China, India as well as Africa. After being under Dutch rule for a brief period till 1710, it was taken over by the French in 1715 who laid the foundation for its socio economic development. By 1735, the French Governor Mahe de Labourdonnais had converted the sleepy and precarious economy into a thriving and critical base for French expansionary ambitions in India and the east. In 1810, the island was won over by the British under whose colonial rule it remained till 1968, when it gained its independence.

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Having been totally uninhabited, both the Dutch and the French invaders brought in slaves mainly from Madagascar and Mozambique to provide the much needed labour to cut down ebony which was the main export during the Dutch period and to grow various food crops and sugar; the latter gradually became the main export for over two centuries. By the time the British left Mauritius, Mauritius was a good example of a mono crop sugar economy.

The French — unlike the earlier Dutch and the later British, who were mainly administrators and did not mingle much with the life of the people — came in as settlers and were given large land concessions by the French king which they carefully cultivated. Apart from the French settlers and the African and a few Asian slaves and artisans, the ethnic composition of the Mauritian population changed dramatically when another wave of immigration took place with the abolition of slavery in 1830 during the British period. This time labour was brought in from India, namely the north eastern and central states of Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh with some artisans and labourers trickling in from the southern states of India. Chinese traders visited Mauritius regularly from earliest times thus completing the ethnic mosaic which is Mauritius.

In many ways Mauritian life is dominated by French culture with the *lingua franca* being Creole which is derived from French. But given that the majority of the population is of Indian and African origin, Indian cultural and religious sentiments are carefully preserved and the African way of life is also very much in evidence. The Chinese for their part have maintained their distinctive work ethics and life style. Thus, Mauritius presents a microcosm of the larger world in which ethnicity is ever present but good sense has prevailed and secular/partisan interests have not gained dominance at the expense of the general good of the country as a whole.

The next section sets out the definitions of the terms ethnicity and race on which the whole analysis is based. This is followed by the third and final section which analyses the progress made by the country focusing on ethnic considerations. It shows the extent to which policy decisions have been taken to cater for all ethnic groups without there being an overt claim to do so or without highlighting ethnic differences.

DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

The terms « ethnic » is defined by the Oxford dictionary as « having a common national or cultural tradition, denoting origin by birth or descent rather than nationality; while the same dictionary refers to « race » as « each of the major divisions of mankind having distinct physical characteristics »² Nationality refers to the « status of belonging to a

2 Dorling Kindersley Illustrated Oxford Dictionary, 2003.

particular nation » which will have several legal requirements. So one may change one's nationality but not one's race; in the case of ethnicity, it can be changed as shown in the next Section but it is a slow process. Even though race and ethnicity are closely related, they are not identical and « serious students of race and ethnicity differentiate between them and study their usage in classifying and categorizing people. »

The term « race » is based on the premise of biological and physical differences. According to Robb (1995), « the concept of « race » included any [essentializing] of groups of people which held them to display inherent, heritable, persistent or predictive characteristics, and which thus had a biological or quasi-biological basis » Distinguished from the concept of « race, » « ethnicity » is a culturally-derived term. Deng (1997) defined ethnicity as an « embodiment of values, institutions, and patterns of behavior, a composite whole representing a people's historical experience, aspirations, and worldview ». Ethnic classification, either externally imposed or intrinsically engendered, often defines people's membership to a group. Aside from social constructs, ethnicity is innately more central to human experience and identity than race. In turn, ethnic distinctiveness is more likely to invoke an innate sense of peoplehood. Ethnic uniqueness thus provides an immediate identity marker both within a group and between groups (Heewong Chang et *al.*, 2001).

Thus in addition to common external factors, ethnicity implies a subjective element and « members of an ethnic group must perform associate themselves with the group. The lowest common denominator for all ethnic groups is based on the metaphor of « bed, blood and cult ». (Hanoomanjee, 2000). Hence :

« All ethnic groups must consider themselves biologically self-perpetuating and endogamous; have an ideology of shared ancestry and a shared religion. On the other hand while ethnicity depends on subjective as well as objective criteria, race is a biological fact. » (Eriksen, 1993).

But just as ethnicity is subjective it is also not stationary or fixed.

As is the case with racial categorization, ethnic categories are often perceived or discussed as though they are fixed and unchanging entities. However, because ethnicity incorporates language, religion, demarcations of territory, and other cultural traits, changes in people's affinity with any of them can occur over time. Thus ethnic categorization should be viewed as somewhat subjective and dependent upon human perception and identity.

Another aspect of ethnicity is its fluidity. « In the milieu of fluidity ethnic consciousness and « way of life » may be created and reinforced to maintain the status quo at certain times and be transformed to embrace other social constructs at other times.

Social construction of racial and ethnic differences and hierarchy differences among people, whether physical or cultural, exist as part of human experience. The recognition of differences may be intensified as contacts between different groups grow. Some of the differences may be absorbed into the innate fabric of a society. Socially constructed meanings are often added to perceived or actual differences whereby these differences become signifiers for people's worth in a society. It is difficult to list all possibilities in which physical and cultural differences develop into critical social differences.

The study of ethnicity by itself and in particular of ethnicity and social mobility intensified during the 1960s. Although, migration is as ancient as the *homo sapiens* the intensity of the movement has accelerated or waned based on demand and supply conditions which stem from several endogenous and exogenous factors. The reasons for renewed interest in ethnicity studies were two fold. First, was the wave of migration from the poorer south to the richer north which gained momentum at that time; and as the earlier immigrants became more settled they began to move up the social ladder as well as became more visible in the country of adoption.

Thus the migration of workers — has led to an erosion of the homogeneity of nations. It has also changed the socio economic structure in several countries. This mixing of the different racial groups has progressed to the extent that nations are « increasing being revealed as bundles of minorities » (Hanoomanjee, 2000).

In contrast to ethnicity, the scientific study of race had begun much earlier, during the 19th and early 20th century. The study of race should in fact stand on firmer grounds as people are classified on the basis of different phenotypes determined by physical attributes such as skin color, cranial size and shape, and hair type. But the growing flaws on this type of classification have become more evident in recent years. First, the biological intermixing among people of apparently different phenotypes is gaining ground, complicates today's « scientific » attempt to sort people out purely by phenotypic traits. Secondly, even the original assumption itself that pure phenotypes exist is now being questioned.

Another difficulty is that racial differences based on biological differences ignores the fact that people with identical physical attributes are often classified differently and hold different social positions in societies. (Heewong Chang, 2001).

Many examples from Brazil, Mexico, Korea and Japan and the erstwhile black-white-colored paradigm of apartheid South Africa only seem to prove the popular ideology, « Money whitens, » whereby a darker-skinned person may become « white » based on economic status (Hanchard, 1994 ; Reichmann, 1999 ; Twine, 1998). Although attempts have been made to show the superiority of some racial groups over others based on phenotypic attributes, this is done despite the fact that genetic

differences among groups with different phenotypic attributes are in fact minor and do not account for much difference in human behavior (Unander, 2000).

Because of these difficulties in studying race, the specialists are now looking at ethnicity to explain various social phenomena rather than depending on race *per se*. Thus, ethnicity has attracted much attention since the 1960s. One reason for this surge of interest could be improved social anthropological techniques. The other more important reason could be political. The general acceptance of democracy as the ideal mode for governing a people perforce recognizes the power of marginal and minority groups. Doing away with dissidents or awkward trouble shooters no longer provides a solution. The need is for a better understanding of the minority groups. But has greater interest in different cultures and ethnicities led to a deeper understanding among nations? According to Huntington, this may not be so. And « *the battle lines of the future could well follow the fault lines between these cultures* » (Huntington, 2000) and after September 11, the fault lines could also take religious overtones, with a dose of terrorism thrown in.

This brings us to the theoretical policy approaches available for the integration of ethnic/race/minority issues in overall national policy formulation. From historic times the policy of immigrant-receiving countries has been to ignore, assimilate or destroy the « ethnicity » of minority groups. The United States of America (USA) which has been the epitome of how to blend different skeins of immigrant peoples adopted the « melting pot approach » since its creation. In terms of statistical data collection, however, race and ethnicity are clearly defined and data collected based thereof. With greater sensitization on ethnicity, the move has been away from the « melting pot » approach. Many countries which started off by adopting the « melting pot » approach to their immigrants have departed from this policy and have evolved a more conciliatory approach to migrants in recent times.

A case in point is Canada where multiculturalism was proclaimed a political reality only in 1971 by the liberal government. And contrary to the American dream of creating a new political entity, the Canadian multiculturalism aimed at preserving the cultural heritage of the minority groups, without sacrificing the national heritage. » (Hanoomanje, 2000). Many examples can be given of countries being more conciliatory to their minority groups. For example, the acceptance of « ebonics » the language of the inner black city as a proper classroom language highlights the inclusive approach adopted by most administrations more recently. This Section has highlighted the conceptual differences between race and ethnicity and the links between these concepts and policy formulation options. The next Section applies these concepts to the Mauritian reality.

ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL POLICY IN MAURITIUS

POPULATION ETHNIC AFFINITIES

As stated before, Mauritius is peopled with immigrants from the three main continents and as shown below, the mix of the different ethnic groups changed dramatically from the first census taken in 1846, to after 1881 with the coming of indentured laborers to replace the slaves in the sugar cane fields. The Group « General » includes a small number of French « colons » or settlers who maintained their main racial features by not mixing with the other groups. Their numbers have not exceeded a few thousand in the 18 th century and they were little more than the Chinese population in the 1950's. The General Population group also includes Mauritians of African and mixed origins.

TABLE 1
Resident Population of Mauritius at Each Selected Census

Year of census	General	Population		
		Indo-Mauritian	Chinese	Total
1846	102,217	56,245	0	158,462
1881	107,323	248,993	3,558	359,874
1921	104,216	265,524	6,745	376,485
1952	148,238	335,327	17,850	501,415

Source : Central Statistical Office, Housing and Population Census reports, several years. Collection of statistical data on an ethnic wise basis was discontinued as from 1952.

From being the dominant group in the island till 1830, the Indo Mauritian population has emerged as the main ethnic group accounting for 70 percent of the total population in 1952 as compared to 35 % in 1846. This group included both Hindu and Muslim immigrants. Mauritian society is a polyethnic one but unlike many other plural societies, one can no longer refer to a single dominant group, because the alleged political hegemony of one particular group has been finely counter balanced by economic or commercial power by the other group (Hanoomanjee, 2000).

Nonetheless, the presence of ethnic groupings each with its own *embodiment of values, institutions and patterns of behavior, — which signifies membership to a group* is only too evident, As stated by Eriksen (1993) :

« Although the ethnics of 1988 may be culturally less distinctive than those of 1888, Mauritians generally perceive themselves as strongly and profoundly different from what they perceive as members of other ethnic

groups. This is a feature which is so pervasive and multifaceted in daily intercourse that it cannot be accounted for as a purely political phenomenon, whether conscious or not. »

Over the past decade, there has been a certain blurring of the external characteristics of the ethnic groupings, due partly to intermarriage between different groups, and partly to the modernization process ; but beneath the external characteristics, ethnic solidarity is still strong. But it is clear that in Mauritius it is ethnicity as pertaining to cultural and social affinity with the group that pervades over racial consideration.

Another feature of Mauritian society is the predominance given to religion over race. For example, the Christian segment of the population would tend to identify itself with the General Population rather than with Indo Mauritians even if it can trace its ancestry to India. A primary stimulator for explaining some type of racial or ethnic affiliation is often economic, social or political power. In the early years of colonization in Mauritius, allegiance to the colonizer's religion did bring some pecuniary benefits as converts were entitled to the facilities that the General Population group had access to. More recently, smaller ethnic groups have maintained strong economic networks, re the Chambers of Commerce, based on shared religious/ethnic affiliations e.g. Muslim interest which has given them claims over group resources. Some of this could present the phenomenon of « *ethnogenesis* » where small minority groups (Hanchard 1994 ; Harell, 1995) have proliferated in the face of dominance and subjugation based on the ethnic/racial differences throughout the world.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

To date, Mauritius has managed its multiracial population fairly successfully without adopting overt positive discrimination policies. From being a dismal economy with little scope to provide employment for its growing population at the time of Independence, it managed to turn the economy around, construct two sectors, namely the Export Manufacturing Zone (EPZ) and Tourism. These sectors provided the jobs needed to reduce unemployment from the highest ever of 20 percent of the labor force to near full employment levels in 1995. And the economy progressed from a low income group to the middle income rank by 2000. The country is facing new challenges and is on the brink of another major reform and restructuring without which the future is bleak. The Constitution provides fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual « *without discrimination by reason of race, place of origin, political opinions, color, creed or sex but subject to respect for the rights and freedom of others and for the public interest. These include the rights to life, liberty and security, freedom of conscience, of expressing*

and association and the right of the individual to protection for the privacy of his home and other property from deprivation of property without compensation. » (The Constitution, 12th March, 1968). This was a wise and far sighted move taken in 1967 when the economic models in fashion were in favor of nationalization of private property and penalizing the small minority who owned most of the economic resources of the country.

Another important policy stance adopted by the socio- political leaders as from the early years of colonization was the focus on education for the children of all segments of the population. While children of the small Franco Mauritian population were educated as from earliest times, the « colored population » who were not slaves or their descendants but free men and small business people were able to get education only in 1829. The Abolition of Slavery Act had provision for the provision of moral education for the slaves and funds were to be made available for their retraining for new jobs. However, not many of the slaves profited from these provisions as most of them left the sugar estates as soon as they obtained their freedom. The first government grants for education were provided only in 1833 and the Elementary Education Act of 1870 provided the basis for primary education for all; but universal primary education was attained only in the 1960s.

The Labor Act of 1908 made it illegal to employ children below 13 years of age thus encouraging parents to send their children to school instead. Further progress was made in the post independence period with secondary education being made free in 1976 and enrolment ratios rising to 56 percent in the 1980s from an average of 40 percent in the 1970s. The provision of free tertiary education in the 1980's completed the cycle. (The second university created in the late 1990s however charges fees.) The series of reforms in the education sector raised the average level of education of the youth population preparing them to face the challenges of a technology driven economy. The various provisions in the education as in the other sectors were freely available to all although some ethnic groups did made greater use of the educational activities than others there was little resentment among any group.

The teaching of the maternal language was also adopted as from the 1870's. Associations like the Arya Samaj introduced in 1901 in Mauritius strengthened the teaching of Hindi. The Baitkas or the village religious centers also taught Hindi and the Madrassas of the mosques taught Urdu and religious education to Muslim children. All this created a scene of belonging among the population and prepared them to take advantage of the facilitates for learning French and English at a later stage. Language teaching was given a further boost when government provided for the teaching of maternal language as part of the primary and secondary curriculum and with the holding of drama and other cultural activities at the national and regional levels as from the 1970s.

The provision of religious subsidies was also a means to bring together the various religious fractions together. Till the 1960's it was only the Christian institutions that were eligible for these grants. But a government commission of 1961 recommended an extension to non – Christian institutions which was itself the result of pressure from the public in 1954 and 1955.

As a result of the facilities available and due to hard work and tenacity of the immigrant population, a certain level of social mobility began to take place as from the 1960s and the children of the original indentured laborers or shop keepers or slaves were better educated and could aspire to move into jobs or start their own business. *« A small number of « gens de couleur » were able to compete economically with the colony's white population, [although] they lacked the political will to be a serious challenge to white economic hegemony. (Allen) As from the 1870's the Indian indentured laborers were making savings from the meager wages that that were paid and by the 1880 some of them had enough funds to buy properties during the period of the « Grand Morcellement » when sugar estates were reducing their acreage under sugar cane because of a fall in sugar prices. « By 1910, there were five Chinese merchants listed among the eighty seven principal merchants of the island. » Benedict Burton, (1965).*

Below is a table which shows employment by ethnicity.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Employment by Ethnicity and Sector, 1952 (Percentage)

	Indo Mauritian		General Population		Chinese Group	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Agriculture	55.2	80.2	19.6	15.5	0.4	2.1
Manufacturing	10	3.1	27.2	182	9.6	30.2
Construction	6.5	0.5	22.3	0.9	0.8	0
Services	12.1	13	16.8	62.1	7.6	30.8
Total (number)	87800	18600	37800	13700	5600	400

The features to note are the predominance of Indians as small planters in the sugar sector as compared to the General Population and the Chinese in the Service sector. The Chinese dominate the trading sector. Unfortunately, it is not possible to make comparisons of the current employment scene for lack of data. There has been a major structural change in the economy with the development of the Manufacturing sector as the main employment creator after the Services sector as shown in the Table below. The Agricultural sector is largely dominated by the Indo

Mauritians and has moved into the Manufacturing and Services sectors. So the ethnic wise distribution could be less pronounced today, but semblance to the 1952 distribution still persists.

TABLE 3

	Total (No.)	Percentage
Agriculture	55,800	11.6
Manufacturing	142,000	29.6
Construction	42,800	8.9
	63,700	13.2
Wholesale and etail trade		
Services	175,100	36.5
Total (number)	479,400	100.0

Source : Central Statistics Office

Another interesting exercise which has been undertaken is the comparison of asset ownership by ethnicity. An ethnic wise analysis of the top 100 companies in Mauritius was undertaken for the years 1990 and 2004. The groupings were made based on the names of directors and managing directors. All multi-nationals are grouped under miscellaneous and government-owned and privatized companies fall into the government category. The exercise was undertaken for the 106 companies which first appeared in the Mauritius illustrated of 1914 published by Macmillan. (Macmillan)

TABLE 4

Classification of Companies based on Ethnicity, 1914

Franco-Mauritian	78
Sino-Mauritian	11
Hindu	5
Muslim	12
Total	106

It can be seen that more than three quarters of companies were in the hands of the Franco Mauritians followed by Muslim and Sino Mauritians. While the Hindus may be the majority in terms of population size they do not have a similar share of the number of companies. This shows the business acumen of these communities in contrast to the Hindu population especially as this ownership ratio does not reflect the population ratio. The General Population does not figure in this categorization at all.

Tables 5 and 6 show the situation in 1990 and 2004. It can be seen that there has been little change in the ethnic wise distribution of

companies. The majority is still owed by Franco Mauritians who also own the largest companies. The other two communities are still far from catching up.

TABLE 5
Classification of Companies based on Ethnicity, 1990

Turnover Rest million	Classification of Companies based on Ethnicity, 1990										Total
	Over 7,000	6,000- 7,000	5,000- 6,000	4,000- 5000	3,000- 4,000	2,000- 3,000	1,000 -	Less than 1,000			
Franco Mauritian	0		1		1		3	28			33
Sino Mauritian							2	24			26
Hindu								7			7
Muslim								4	1		5
General Population											
Miscellaneous									1		21
Government Owned(I)				1					1		8
Total			1	1	1		8	89			100

The table below gives the 100 largest companies based on turnover and ethnicity in 2004.

TABLE 6
Classification of Companies based on Ethnicity, 2004

Turnover Rs million	Classification of Companies based on Ethnicity, 2004										Total	
	Over 7,000	6,000- 7,000	5,000- 6,000	4,000- 5,000	3,000- 4,000	2,000 - 3,000	1,000- 2,000	less than 1000				
Rs million												
Franco Mauritian	3	2	2		1	3				8	19	38
Sino Mauritian				1		1				3	12	17
Hindu											7	7
Muslim		1			1					2	7	11
General Population									1			1
Miscellaneous			1	1	1	2				4	7	16
Government Owned(I)	1	1				1				2	5	10
Total	4	4	4	2	3	8				19	57	100

The interesting development that has taken place between 1990 and 2004 is the progression towards the larger companies. It is clear that the company size has gradually increased. No adjustment has been made for inflation but even between 1990 and 2004 the number of companies in the less than Rs 1000 million has fallen from 89 to 57 while four companies have a turnover of over Rs 7,000 million. One government owned privatized company had a turnover of Rs. 10,000 million in 2004. There has been little change in the ethnic distribution between 1990 and 2004.

The reasons for the persistence of some ethnic groups in the corporate sector could be varied: from the development of cartels among those already in the business, to lack of capital for entry, market barriers; this is despite the fact that government policy is non-discriminatory. All communities are encouraged to enter into the corporate sector.

Many of the points raised as regards ethnicity and group culture seem to play into the corporate culture in Mauritius today which has not changed much from what existed 200 years ago. « *Ethnicity is the product of actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self-definition and culture ; however, ethnicity is also constructed by external social, economic, and political processes and actors as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions that dominate* » (Nagel, 1994). It seems clear that in Mauritius ethnicity still dominates the socio economic life of individuals and society notwithstanding all efforts to give equal chances to all by government and social leaders. But as stated in the 994 UNDP, Human Development Report, « Mauritius is a multiracial society that has made determined efforts to maintain its cultural diversity — while promoting equal opportunities for all through a strong social programme » and there is little reason for discounting this tried and tested approach.

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