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**“Voix de la Marge”
Importance historique
et symbolique de la Ram Leela
et de la tradition du Ramayana
pendant et après la période
de l'engagisme à Maurice
(1870-1950)**

*History is both a form of memory
and a discipline that draws on
memory as source material. Today
some of the most productive
discussions about the nature of
history are pursued in this area...*

*Social memory or collective
memory refers to the stories and
assumptions of the past that
illustrate or account for key features
of the society we know today...*

**“VOICES FROM
THE EDGE”¹
HISTORIC IMPORTANCE
AND SYMBOLISM OF RAM
LEELA AND THE RAMAYANA
TRADITION DURING THE
AGE OF INDENTURE AND
AFTER IN MAURITIUS
(1870-1950)**

John Tosh

*'Memory and the Spoken Word' in The Pursuit of History
(5th Edition, 2010), p.303*

PAGE PRÉCÉDENTE

1. Title obtained from Gyanendra Pandey, 'Voices from the Edge: The Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories' in Vinayak Chaturvedi (Ed), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Post-Colonial* (India, 2012), p.281.

C'CONTRE

2. Satyendra Peerthum, 'The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha) in Mauritius during the Age of Indenture between 1870 and 1910' (Conference Paper presented at the International Indentured Labour Conference in Reunion Island, August 2018), pp. 1-2; <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ramlila-the-traditional-performance-of-the-ramayana-00110>; www.aapravasighat.org.

3. Mauritius National Archives (MNA), PB 28, Letter from John F. Trotter, Protector of Immigrants, to Governor Sir John Pope Hennessy, Immigration Depot, Port Louis, 4th November 1883.

4. Mahashivaratree ou Grande Nuit de Shiva est un festival hindou très populaire. Interview with the Late Mr. Sanjay Dharamsingh, 85 years old and great great grandson of Immigrant Dharamsingh, 2013; The Dharamsingh Family Papers; Mahatma Gandhi Indian Immigration Archives (MGIIIA), PE 1, Ship Arrival Register for 1826 to 1842.

Le Ramayana est l'une des deux grandes anciennes épopées en Inde; elle raconte la vie et l'oeuvre de Rama, roi d'Ayodhya et de sa famille. Les épisodes les plus fameux sont connus à travers des représentations théâtrales et folkloriques de la Ram Leela.

Cet article analyse, principalement, la signification historique et le symbolisme de la Ram Leela, de la tradition du Ramayana dans la formation de la communauté, la vie sociale et culturelle des travailleurs indiens engagés et de leurs descendants à Maurice entre 1870 et 1950. Les autres thèmes abordés sont les traditions orales, l'histoire et les pratiques sociales chez les descendants de ces travailleurs dans la dernière phase de l'engagisme et la première moitié du XX^e siècle. Cette approche a été largement négligée dans l'historiographie mauricienne jusqu'aux années 1990.

Or, les 462 800 engagés indiens et non indiens qui ont atteint les côtes mauriciennes, et dont la plupart ont été enregistrés sur le site du patrimoine mondial d'Aapravasi Ghat, ont apporté avec eux leurs langues, leur culture, leurs religions, leur cuisine, leurs histoires, leurs énigmes, leurs jeux populaires et leurs traditions.

Ram Leela illustre ce transfert de traditions culturelles de la Mère-Inde à Maurice. Cela fait partie de la « conscience et de l'héritage du Ramayana » qui existe à Maurice depuis le milieu du XIX^e siècle. La Ram Leela et la tradition du Ramayana ont contribué à ce que le site de l'Aapravasi Ghat (anciennement connu sous le nom de dépôt d'immigration) ait, aussi, été reconnu par le Comité du patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO² au titre de Patrimoine Immatériel de l'Humanité.

THE HISTORIC IMPORTANCE OF THE RAMAYANA TRADITION & RAM LEELA IN MAURITIUS

In early November 1883,

in a dispatch to Governor Sir John Pope Hennessy, John F. Trotter, the Protector of Immigrants, reported that more than one week earlier, almost all of the 151 Indian indentured workers and some Indo-Mauritians on Deep River Sugar Estate went on strike in the district of Flacq. The main reason being that the Mr. Jean-Francois Rouillard, the estate owner, did not allow them to take a day off in order to celebrate Deepavali or the festival of lights which is associated with the glorious return of Lord Ram to Ayodhya. The estate owner refused because it was the start of the sugar harvest season and would affect sugar production on his estate. The following day, Dharamsingh, the Chief Sirdar of

Deep River, along with a delegation of 22 labourers, showed up at the Office of the Protector of Immigrants and filed a complaint against their employer.

After a mediation by the Protector Trotter, Mr. Rouillard allowed his workers to take their day off, if they agreed to work for a whole day the following Sunday³. Immigrant Dharamsingh also played a key role in negotiating this deal. He was a Brahmin Hindu and a literate skilled worker from Bihar and, for many years, the leader of the contract workers on Deep River. Ever since the early 1870s, Dharamsingh promoted the holding of the Ram Leela or "Ram's Play" in the local estate camp and in observing important Hindu religious days such as Deepavali and Mahashivaratree⁴.

Between 1883 and until the end of indenture in 1910

three successive Pro- tectors of Immigrants reported at least another 13 complaints and incidents where Hindu, Muslim, and Christian Indian wor- kers and Indo-Mauritians under contract, on and off the sugar estates, in the emerging villages, and in Port Louis, refused to work during the harvest season be- cause of their need to observe their sacred days of their religions⁵. It is from the letters and petitions that some of the Indian immigrants either signed or which were written by themselves or on their behalf, their com- plaints, and the actions they took as active agents in order to exercise greater control on their lives, that we can recover their voices from the edge of the archival records and history⁶.

In addition, between the early 1860s and the early 1880s, collective group actions such as group protests and strikes frequently took place on the sugar estates, in Port Louis, and emerging villages, such as the one organized by Dharamsingh and most of the Deep Ri- ver workers. At the same time, the reports and letters from the Stipendiary Magistrates indicate, to a certain extent, the genesis of group and community formation and action and a sense of collective consciousness and solidarity among the indentured workers⁷.

In one of his seminal articles, Dr. Prabhu P. Mohapatra, a well-known Indian labour historian, explained when looking at indentured labour in the British Caribbean plantation colonies between 1880s and 1920s, that:

*“Community formation on the plantations was thus be- set with structural problems, but in spite of them there emerged an embryonic community centred on the sugar estates [and emerging villages]. The spearhead was embo- died in the time-expired labourers, whose terms of inden- ture had ended.”*⁸

More than half a century ago, the late Dr. Burton Be- nedict, famous American anthropologist, indicated,

that during last years and decades of the Age of Inden- ture, on the sugar estates and in the emerging villages, was the period when the Old Indian Immigrants, the new indentured immigrants, and the Indo-Mauritians were going through the process of community forma- tion. During this period, they were purchasing, selling, and leasing land, leaving the sugar estates, became skilled and semi-skilled workers and entrepreneurs, es- tablished hamlets and villages and also achieving some measure of social and economic mobility by thousands of individuals. As a result, they were reasserting their religious lives and cultural activities which gradually led to the emergence of several small Hindu religious groups such as the Arya Samajis, Sanathanists, Pura- nics, and Brahmo Samajis⁹.

Almost half a century later, in January 2013

His Excellency Kailash Purryag, the former President of the Repu- blic of Mauritius, made an emotional and histo- ric trip to his ancestral village in Bihar, India. On that special occasion, some of the talented villager artists gave a vibrant and popular rendition of Ram Leela or the po- pular version of the story of Ram which served as a sym- bolic reminder to the former Mauritian President that one of their lost sons had returned home to Bihar where the kingdom of Lord Ram once existed. Ram Leela or “Ram’s Play” (emanating also from the Ramacharitma- nas) a popular performance of the Ramayana epic in a series of scenes that include songs, narrations, recitals, and dialogues aimed at the common people.

This fact is important when looking at Mauritian his- tory and the history of the Aapravasi Ghat World He- ritage Site or the Immigration Depot and of the Indian indentured labourers. After all, the Aapravasi Ghat was inscribed under UNESCO World Heritage Com- mittee’s criterion vi which deals with the intangible heritage of a particular people, place, and country¹⁰. Ram Leela is a key example of this intangible heritage

5. MNA/PB 30, Letters and Reports of the Protector of Immigrants to other Government Departments and the Colonial Secretary for 1883 to 1885 to PB 54, Letters and Reports of the Protector of Immigrants to other Government Departments and the Colonial Secretary for 1909 to 1911.

6. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Prin- ceton University Press, USA, 2009), pp.19-53; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press Books, USA, 1995), pp.1-31.

7. MNA/RA 1561, Letters and Reports of the Stipendiary Magis- trates to the Governor and Colonial Secretary for 1860 to RA 2562 for 1880.

8. Prabhu P. Mohapatra, ‘Following Custom:’? Representa- tions of Community among Indian Indentured Immigrant Labour in the West Indies, 1880-1920’, in Rana P. Behal and Marcel van der Linden, *Coolies, Capital, and Colonialism: Studies in Indian Labour History, International Review of Social History* (Supplement No. 14) (Cam- bridge University Press, UK, 2007), pp.179-180.

9. Burton Benedict, ‘Caste in Mau- ritius’, in Barton M. Schwartz (ed), *Caste in Overseas Indian Communi- ties* (Chandler Publishing Company, San Francisco, California, 1967), pp.22-31; Satyendra Peerthum, *They Came to Mauritian Shores: The Life-Stories and History of the Indentured Labourers in Mauritius* (1826-1937) (AGTF, Mauritius, 2017), pp.54-56.

10. Peerthum, ‘The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha) in Mauritius during the Age of Indenture between 1870 and 1910’, pp.1-2; *The AGTF Nomination Dos- sier* submitted to UNESCO in 2005.

▶ Letter written and signed in Telugu by Immigrant Rungassamy, Job Contractor, to Mr. Henri LaHousse, owner of Beau Vallon Sugar Estate, requesting that the Indian Indentured Workers be allowed to observe Deepavali and other Hindu religious festivals in 1875

(Rugassamy Family Collection/ Courtesy of the Rugassamy Family)

▶ An extract from a Ramayana text in the Kaithi script from northern India which was brought by Im- migrant Gopal Ram in 1871. He was a literate sirdar from Bihar and it describes the beginning of Lord Ram’s 14-year exile.

(Courtesy of the Gopal Ram Family Collection)

11. [https://ich.unesco.org/en/ RL/ramlila-the-traditional-perfor- mance-of-the-ramayana-00110](https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/ramlila-the-traditional-performance-of-the-ramayana-00110); www.aapravasighat.org.

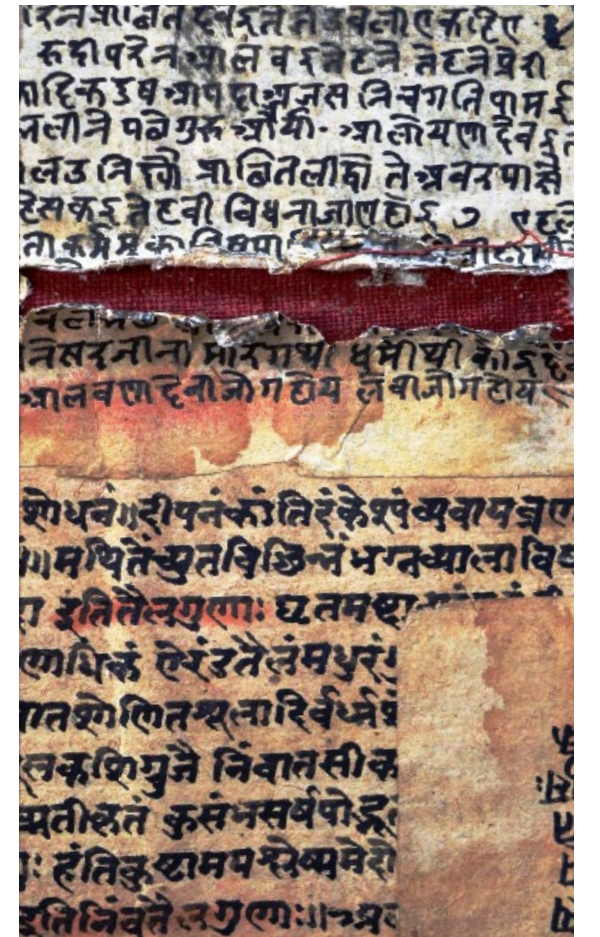
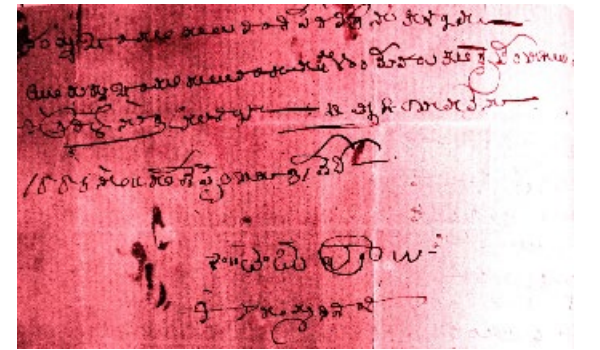
12. The Keynote speech of Pandit Arun on 18th August 2016 at the GOPIO International Conference on Indentured Labour and the Global Indian Diaspora at the Ramayan Centre in Rose-Belle.

and it is important to remember that in December 2005, the former Director-General of UNESCO, Koï- chiro Matsuura, proclaimed 43 new Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritages of Humanity, inclu- ding traditional Indian performances of the Ramaya- na, the Ramlila¹¹.

Recently Pandit Arun, the Chairman of the Ramaya- na Center explained in Mauritius, ever since the late 19th century, the popular enactment of the Ram Leela “have been a constant source of inspiration and strength to the Indian Diaspora, in particular amidst Indians who were lured away to the colonies, such as in Mauritius, in the nineteenth century to work in the sugar cane field. It allowed them not only to face the harsh conditions but also to keep their culture alive. This Ramayana conscious- ness continues to this day among Mauritian Hindus”.

It is evident that Pandit Rajendra Arun, a naturalized Mauritian citizen originally from India, accurately de- scribes the impact which this ‘Ramayana conscious’ has had among Hindu Indo-Mauritians. After all, for more than a century and a half, it has endured and prospered through the public enactments of the Ram Leela. Ever since their arrival in Mauritius between the late 1820s and 1860s, many of the Indian immigrants brought with them knowledge of their sacred texts such as the Vedas the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, Ram Leela, and even copies of the Ramayana¹².

This fact is clearly illustrated today, around half a do- zen authentic copies of the Ramayana dating from the late 19th century and written in the Kaithi and De- vanagari scripts of northern India exist in Mauritius. A copy in the Kaithi script exists in the Beekrumsing Ramlallah Interpretation Centre at the Aapravasi Ghat World Heritage site and the Mahatma Gandhi Insti- tute Folk Museum. At least four known copies also exist among Indo-Mauritian families who are descen- dants of Indian indentured workers such as the Gopal and Peerthum families.



THE PIONEERING WORK OF THE OLD IMMIGRANTS SIRDAR RAMDHUNY NUNDALL, IMMIGRANTS SERVANIN AND RUNGASSAMY

*Between
the 1830s
and 1840s,*

there are hundreds of immigrants who came from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and other parts of Indian who were literate and semi-literate.

Many among them are known as the ‘early pioneer Indian indentured workers’¹³ who by the mid-19th century and after managed to leave estate labour and achieved some measure of social and economic mobility and obtain some rudimentary education. They were called Old immigrants after having completed their first period of industrial residence or indenture contract which usually lasted 5 years.

Old Immigrant entrepreneurs as sirdars, job contractors, overseers, head of workshops, skilled artisans, and money lenders wielded a lot of power, had access to financial resources, and regularly obtained favors from the plantation and colonial elite. Marina Carter and Crispin Bates called these the “avenues of socio-economic mobility”. Between the 1830s and 1870s, for the New and Old Immigrants, apart from the planters, employers, and estate managers, these Old Immigrant entrepreneurs became their points of reference, they provided help to their fellow immigrants during the best and worst of times, and acted as “intermediaries” with the plantation owners/employers.

Old Immigrant entrepreneurs in their roles as sirdars, overseers, job contractors, skilled artisans, servants/domestics, head of workshops, merchants, gardeners, traders, shopkeepers, and money lenders developed “chain of personal relationships” with the other Old and New Immigrants, and even with some of the remaining ex-apprentices. Essentially, it was a patron and client social and economic relationship as well as paternalistic in nature which created a certain amount of dependency.

Between the 1830s and the 1870s and after, this for-

med part of the complex and long-term networks of social and economic relations which the Old Immigrant entrepreneurs created and maintained.

*Bates
and Carter*

observe that this “sirdari and contractor elite” was a “form of semi-autonomous subaltern careering” dominated by the Old Im-

migrant entrepreneurs which emerged from within the indentured labour community. This clear example of indentured and ex-indentured immigrant agency enabled them to secure their niche in colonial society, especially on the sugar estates, and their survival in the plantation hierarchy during the mid- and late nineteenth century and after, as they tried to exercise some control on their lives and economic activities.¹⁴ During this period, as Carter accurately noted in her brilliantly written article ‘Subaltern Success Stories: Socio-Economic Mobility in the Indian Labour Diaspora-Some Mauritian Case-Studies’ that: “the first generation of Indian immigrants established themselves in positions of authority on the plantations of authority on the plantations, and as wealthy land-owners and religious and cultural patrons in the Indian villages which grew out of the grand morcellement...”¹⁵

It was through the actions, the funds, the decisions and the organizational capacities of these successful early Indian immigrants who played a key role between the 1870s and 1890s, that Ram Leela was being enacted on some of the sugar estates, hamlets and villages such as in Grand Port, Flacq and Riviere du Rempart and also in other rural districts. How do we know this? Essentially through fragments of archival documents from the National Archives, MGI Archives and the National Library, a study of the life stories and experiences of some of these outstanding and forgotten Indian indentured workers and the family stories/oral family narratives and

13. Peerthum, ‘The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha) in Mauritius...’, op.cit., pp. 1-5

14. Crispin Bates and Marina Carter, ‘Sirdars as Intermediaries in Nineteenth-Century Indian Ocean Indentured Labour Migration’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No.2 (2017), pp.462-467/473-474/480-484; Marina Carter, ‘Subaltern Success Stories: Socio-Economic Mobility in the Indian Labour Diaspora-Some Mauritian Case-Studies’, *Internationales Asienforum*, Vol.33 (2002), pp.93-96.

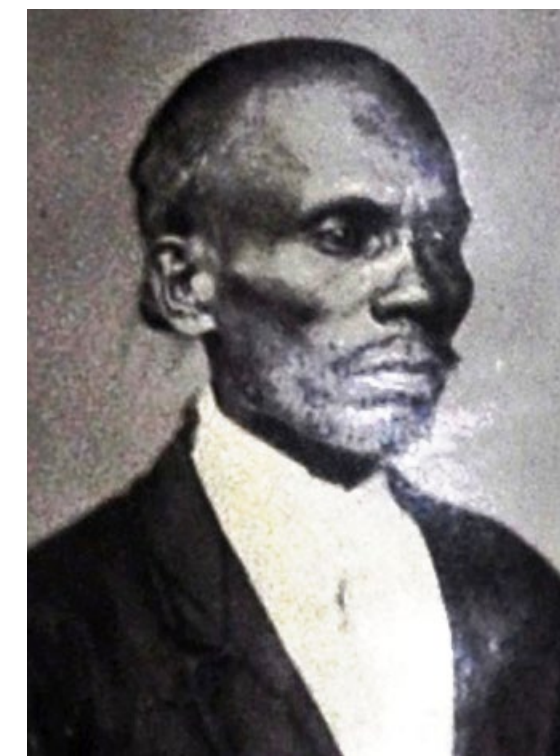
15. Carter, ‘Subaltern Success Stories...’, op.cit., pp.96.

▶
Immigrant Servanin was photographed at the age of 75 at the Immigration Depot or Aapravasi Ghat in 1883.

(PG Series, Immigrant Photo Registers, MGI Indian Immigration Archives)

▶▶
Immigrant Rungassamy was photographed at the age of 70 in 1881 at the Immigration Depot.

(PG Series, Immigrant Photo Registers, MGI/IIA)



16. Peerthum, ‘The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha) in Mauritius...’, op.cit., pp. 1-20

17. Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (UK, 2012), pp.1-22; David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History* (UK, 2004), pp. 1-23; See Vinayak Chaturvedi (Ed), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Post Colonial* (India, 2012).

18. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, ‘Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda’ in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (USA, 1997), pp. 1-5/35-40.

their private family documents which bring to light the contributions of some of these important immigrants¹⁶. This scholarly approach, such as a focus on the subaltern experiences or “subaltern lives”, life-stories and agency of these Indian workers who eventually became “settlers” in their own right in a complex, racist and highly stratified colonial society, has been suggested in some of recent publications on colonial India, the British colonial world and the Indian Ocean World by Clare Anderson and David Arnold.¹⁷ At the same time, it allows us to take up the challenge which was put forward several years ago by Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, two American social historians, to a “rethinking of a research agenda” by historians and scholars when looking at social history in modern European specifically British colonies and its relation with the Mother Country during the 19th century and after.¹⁸ This type

of academic analysis allows us to gain a better insight into how intangible traditions and knowledge was transmitted and preserved among the Indian indentured and ex-indentured workers and their descendants as they chose Mauritius as their new home while still remembering and longing for their ancestral homeland.

*Between
the mid-19th
and mid-20th
centuries,*

in all the eight rural districts, there were important Old Indian immigrants who clearly showed that one man can make a difference in this transmission of cultural heritage and traditions from the Indian immigrants to the first, second and third generations of Indo-Mauritians. It is essen-

tially oral traditions which serve as the vehicle for this transmission, perpetuation and preservation of these important aspect of their intangible cultural heritage. Who were some of these outstanding and unsung heroes of the history of indentured labourers and their settlement of Mauritius as they went from sojourners to settlers.¹⁹

Between the 1890s and 1910s, Sirdar Ramdhuny Nundall, the son of Immigrant Nunlall (a Bengali who arrived in Mauritius in 1849), and my great great grandfather, established a bhaïtka²⁰ in the estate camp of Labourdonnais Sugar Estate. It was one of the first places in Riviere du Rempart district where the Ramayana was being read on a weekly basis and the Ram Leela was enacted four times per year by children of the Indian immigrants. Sirdar Nundall helped to establish the tradition of the Ramayana such as Ram Leela and even reading of the Ramayana by Hindu priests and literate Hindus in Labourdonnais estate camp.²¹

During the mid-19th century, especially among the majority of the non-literate immigrants, Ram Leela was one of the important forms of entertainment. Between the 1870s and 1890s, in Grand Port district, Immigrant Rungassamy from present-day Andhra Pradesh and Immigrant Servanin from present-day Kerala, two job contractors and small planters encouraged their fellow countrymen to uphold and observe their religion and traditions²². They arrived in Mauritius in 1839 and 1836 respectively under 5-year contracts as labourers and were registered at the Police Headquarters in Port Louis²³.

They established bhaïtkas on the sugar estates of Union Vale, St. Hubert and Beau Vallon and brought pundits to encourage the reading of the Ramayana. Over a period of more than 30 years, they encouraged the children of the immigrants and Indo-Mauritian boys to hold the Ram Leela twice per year. They are two former indentured immigrants who pioneered the tradition of reading the Ramayana and the Ram Leela in Grand Port or the south of Mauritius²⁴.

RAM LEELA AND THE THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS OF IMMIGRANTS DHARAMSINGH, CALLEE, VIRAMEN

What about the other parts or districts of Mauritius?

Between the late 1820s and the 1840s, there were hundreds of immigrants who were semi-literate with several among them even fully literate. After all, in part of the Miscellaneous Letters and Petitions Collection of the RA Series (23 volumes) of the Mauritius National Archives, for the period between 1841 and 1859, there are an estimated 151 petitions and letters that were signed and even around 22 petitions and letters that were partly or entirely written by Indian Old Immigrants in their native languages and scripts²⁵.

In addition, according to 36 oral interviews which I have undertaken between 2010 and 2018, with elderly descendants of Indian indentured workers (who completed their genealogies and were well versed in their family history), it is clear, to a certain extent, that many of their ancestors were semi-literate immigrants and several among them were fully literate. Furthermore, the interviewees also informed that many among their ancestors were very knowledgeable in the Hindu scriptures and texts. According to the oral traditions of their families, their forebears narrated stories from the Ramayana and encouraged the enactment of the Ram Leela and also the Ram Katha or popular oral recitals of that Indian epic²⁶. Immigrant ancestors such as Dharamsingh, a Brahmin from Bihar, who was a sirdar, was literate and arrived in Mauritius in 1835²⁷.

Between the 1870s and 1880s, he established several bhaïtkas in southern Flacq district at the sugar estates of Deep River, Beau Champs, and La Louise. Over a period of more than 20 years, he funded schools for Indian children and encouraged the enactment

19. Peerthum, 'The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha) in Mauritius...', op.cit., pp. 1-15

20. A gathering place where immigrants and their descendants interacted with each other and promote Indian culture, education and religion. It was also a school where the children and descendants of Indian immigrants were educated.

21. Interviews with D' Sateeanund Peerthum, Senior Historian, Ex-Minister, Ambassador, Teacher & Journalist, 78 years old and the great grandson of Sirdar Ramdhuny Nundall - 2010, 2016.

22. S. Peerthum, 'The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha)...', op.cit., pp. 1-2/14-15; Interview with M^r Kartikeya Servanin, 90 years old and the great great grandson of Immigrant Servanin - 2015; Interview with M^r Naga Rungassamy, 83 years old and the great grandson of Immigrant Rungassamy - 2014.

23. MGIIIA, PE 2, Ship Arrival Register for 1835 to 1839; MNA, RC 31, Letters and Petitions from Individuals to the Governor and Colonial Secretary for 1844 to 1846.

24. Interview with M^r Kartikeya Servanin and with M^r Naga Rungassamy, cf supra.

25. MNA, RA 676, Miscellaneous Letters and Petitions for 1841 to RA 1530 for 1859 consisting of 23 vol.

26. These interviews were carried for the AGTF, the Truth and Justice Commission, and for my persona research over a period of 9 years. Today, only 21 out of 36 interviewees are still alive. More than 36 family paper collections were consulted to supplement and cross-check the oral accounts.

27. MGIIIA, PE 4, Ship Arrival Register for 1835 to 1842; PF 2, Indenture Contracts for 1835 to 1842; MNA, RC 26, Letters and Petitions from Individuals to the Governor and Colonial Secretary for 1838 to 1841.

28. Interview with the Late M^r Sanjay Dharamsingh 85 years old, cf supra.

29 & 31. Interview with the Late M^r Virendra Callee, 80 years old and great great grandson of Immigrant Callee, 2014; the Callee Family Papers.

30. MGIIIA, PE 2, Ship Arrival Register for 1835 to 1839; MNA, RC 29, Letters and Petitions from Individuals to the Governor and Colonial Secretary for 1843.

32. MGIIIA, PE 4, Ship Arrival Register for 1835 to 1842; PF 2, Indenture Contracts for 1835 to 1842.

33. Interview with the Late M^r Mooloo Viramen, 79 years old and great great grandson of Immigrant Viramen, 2013.

34. Refer to the 36 oral interviews..., cf note 26.

of Ram Leela. It becomes evident that ever since the mid-19th century, the seeds of Ramayana consciousness and the tradition of Ram Leela had already been sown and gradually established in rural Mauritius²⁸.

During the second half of the 19th century, Flacq was not the only Mauritian district where the enactment of the Ram Leela was encouraged. Between the 1870s and 1890s, Immigrant Callee in the district of Savanne in the estate camps of Bel Ombre, Chamouny and near the village of Souillac²⁹. He arrived as a skilled worker from Orissa and arrived in Mauritius in 1837³⁰. During more than 30 years, he encouraged the performance of Ram Leela in some of the estate camps and newly established Indo-Mauritian villages³¹.

For his part, Immigrant Viramen or Veeramen arrived in Mauritius in 1838 at the age of 45 as a sirdar from Madras, India. He was classified as a "Malabar" who was from the district of Madurai in the Madras Presidency³². Viramen was semi-literate when he ar-

rived in Mauritius and worked as a sirdar for ten years and then became a job contractor for Trianon Sugar Estate. Between the 1870s and 1880s, he encouraged the immigrants of Trianon and those in nearby settlements such as Moka and Saint Pierre villages to observe their religion and cultural traditions such as Ram Leela and storytelling. During the same period, he became a small sugar cane planter and set aside some land close to Trianon where he built a bhaïtka for some of his fellow ex-Indian indentured workers. He died in 1885 at the age of 92³³.

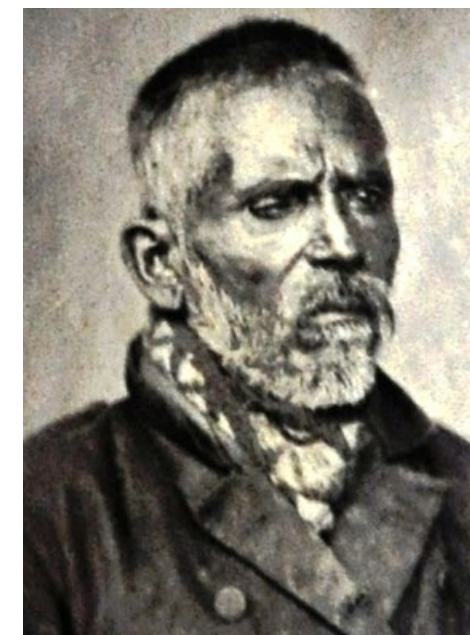
In Mauritius, through oral traditions and family genealogies it is possible to discover how immigrants such as Dharamsingh, Callee and Viramen were able, to a certain extent, to promote Ram Leela and Ramayana consciousness among their fellow indentured workers, their children and grand children at the grassroots level in different districts of Mauritius³⁴.



▲ Immigrant Dharamsingh in 1875 at 60 years old at the Immigration Depot. (PG Series, Immigrant Photo Registers, MGIIIA)



▲ Immigrant Callee in 1885 at 85 years old at the Immigration Depot. (PG Series, Immigrant Photo Registers, MGIIIA)



▲ Immigrant Viramen in 1875 at 82 years old at the Immigration Depot.



RAM LEELA AND READING OF THE RAMAYANA AS PART OF VILLAGE/ESTATE CAMP CULTURE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Between the 1870s and the early 1900s, the enactment of Ram Leela gradually became an integral part of the popular entertainment and culture of the Indian workers and Indo-Mauritians and their descendants in the island's estate camps and villages. It formed a key component of the cultural landscape of the Indo-Mauritians in all of the island's rural districts along with Divali, Mahashivaratee, pilgrimage to Grand Bassin³⁵. The Late Balram Narsimooloo of the village of Cottage (the village where my family comes from), in the north of Mauritius in Pamplemousses district, was a sirdar on Labourdonnais and Forbach Sugar Estates reiterates these facts. He was the grandson of a Telugu indentured labourer who arrived in Mauritius in 1885 and a good friend with my great grandfather and grandfather.

In 2010, in a 2-hour interview, he explained the importance of Ram Leela for the villagers of Cottage and other villages in the north of the island such L'Esperance Trebuchet, Poudre d'Or Village and Hamlet including Forbach Estate Camp. He explained that between the 1920s and the 1950s, it was one of their rare forms of entertainment which was sanctioned by the local village council or panchyat and Ramayana verses were recited in the local bhaitka³⁶.

Between the early 1900s and 1950s, great historical figures such as Manilall Doctor, Swami Satantranand, Dr. Bharatwaj, Pandit Kistoe, Pandit Sahadeo Pandit Bissoondoyal, Pandit Ramnarain and Sookdeo Bissoondoyal encouraged Hindu Indo-Mauritians to become educated, read the Ramayana and to hold the

▲
Viren Mootoo Carpen, in the middle with his paghree, dhotee, and cane, with his panchyat and villagers at Morcellement Saint Andre Village in 1949.

35. Peerthum, 'The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha) in Mauritius...', op.cit., pp.1-20; The 36 oral interviews... cf note 26.

36. Interview with the Late M^r Balram Narsimooloo, 90 years old and grandson of Immigrant Narsimooloo who arrived in Mauritius in 1885 - 2010; Interviews with D^r Satteeanund Peerthum...cf supra.



Children studying the Ramayana at the Mount Village in 1948.
(Courtesy of the Mauritius Chamber of Agriculture)



The stage where the Ram Leela was enacted in December 1943 after the performance of the Mahayaj by the Jan Andolan

(Courtesy of the Late Uttam Bissoondoyal, former Director of the MGI/Bissoondoyal Family Collection)

37. Interview with the Late Uttam Bissoondoyal, Former Director of the MGI and son of Sookdeo Bissoondoyal and nephew of Basdeo Bissoondoyal - 2011; Peerthum, 'The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha) in mauritius...', op.cit. pp.18-20; The 36 oral interviews... cf note 26.

38. Interview with Vijay Mathur, 76 years old and the son of Chubylall Mathur - 2014; Interviews with D' Satteeanund Peerthum..., cf supra; S. Peerthum, 'The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha) in Mauritius...', op.cit., pp.18-20.

39. Interview with Sandiren Mootoo Carpen, 51 years old and great grandson of Viren Mootoo Carpen - 2014; S. Peerthum, 'The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha)...', op.cit., pp.18-20; The 36 oral interviews... cf note 26.

40. Interview with the Late Uttam Bissoondoyal - 2011; The Bissoondoyal Family Papers; Uttam Bissoondoyal, Promises to Keep (MGI Press, Mauritius, 1991), pp.1-5/101-103.

41. Interview with the Late Uttam Bissoondoyal, id.; S. Peerthum, 'The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha) in Mauritius...', op.cit., pp.1-20; The 36 oral interviews... cf note 26.

Ram Leela regularly on the sugar estates and in the villages. Between the 1920s and 1950s, hundreds of Hindi schools were established all over the island, in the villages and some estate camps, by the Hindu Sanatanists, Puranics, Arya Samajis and members of the Jan Adolan Movement. They also included Hinduism, reading of the Ramayana and enactment of the Ram Leela. During the 1970s, these facts were duly noted and praised by Pandit Bissoondoyal and K. Hazareesingh, ex-Director of the MGI³⁷.

Between the 1930s and 1950s, Chubylall Mathur was a Hindi teacher and one of the well known organizers of Ram Leela in Riviere du Rempart district. He held thousands of performances throughout that particular district over a period of more than a quarter century. It was thanks to the efforts of such visionary Hindu leaders and teachers between the 1920s and the 1960s, that this 'Ramayana consciousness' has been nurtured through the reading and chanting of the Ramayana and the enactment of Ram Leela has become an integral part of the intangible heritage of the Hindu Indo-Mauritian community³⁸.

During the mid-20th century, the enactment of the Ram Leela became very common in the Mauritian villages and estate camps. It was carried out at least once per year in many of the major villages and estate camps and they also had bhaitkas where children were told stories of the Ramayana and encouraged to read the famous Indian epic. In villages such as Cottage and Morcellement Sainte Andre, the panchayats and village leaders and elders such as Viren Mootoo Carpen, a sirdar and great grandson of Mootoo Carpen, a Telugu immigrant who arrived in Mauritius in 1836, actively encouraged the enactment of the Ram Leela during the 1940s and 1950s. Therefore, the panchayats, the bhaitkas, the readings of the Ramayana and the enactment of the Ram Leela helped to consolidate the Ramayana consciousness and Hinduism and Hindu traditions in Mauritius³⁹.

Between the 1940s and 1960s for more than 30 years, Pandit Bissoondoyal and the Jan Andolan established hundreds of schools and bhaitkas through the island including in Port Louis. They encouraged the enactment of the Ram Leela, Ramayana and Gita. The enactment of the Ram Leela contributed to the cultural revival of Hinduism and Hindu traditions during the mid-20th century and cultural liberation of the Indo-Mauritian masses. It allowed the Hindus of Mauritius to reappropriate their culture and traditions and revalorize their history. In December 1943, a reenactment of the Ram Leela was carried out after the Mahayaj at Pouce Street in Port Louis with the blessings of the Jan Andolan⁴⁰.

To conclude, the tradition of the enactment of Ram Leela and the oral tradition of narrating stories from the Ramayana have existed in Mauritius for more than one and a half centuries. It forms a pillar of Indo-Mauritian popular culture and intangible values which the Hindu indentured labourers brought with them and established in the Mauritian estate camps and villages during the mid-19th century and after which were first encouraged by the Indian immigrants themselves and consolidated by their descendants. This helped to perpetuate Ramayana consciousness in Mauritius⁴¹.

It was a long and complex process which allowed them consolidate and expand their religion and cultural traditions. The perennial values from the Ramayana and the Ram Leela of Ram as the ideal husband, Sita as the perfect wife, Laskhman as the forever loyal brother and Ram's Ayodhya or Ram Raj as the Golden Age of truth and justice in ancient India is still admired and emulated in Mauritius and India as well.

These values form an integral part of the values of our society today and for decades to come and contribute to the entrenchment of Ramayana consciousness such as the Ram Leela and the Ram Katha and its popula-



city in early 21st century Mauritius. This can clearly be seen ever since 2001, with the enactment of the Ramayana Centre Act and with the establishment of the Ramayana Centre itself at Rose-Belle, a village in the south east of Mauritius.

Finally over the past forty years, Mauritian historians, scholars, and academic have been striving to write the history of the Indian indentured workers and their descendants. For many years, they have researched, recorded, and analysed information from the archival records, family collections, and oral family histories in order to recover the subaltern voices of the Indian immigrants and their descendants from the edge of the archival records and history⁴².

▲ **The Surviving Stone Structures of Immigrant Dharamsingh's Bhaika on Deep River Sugar Estate built in 1875.**

This picture was taken by his grandson in 1929 and does not exist today. (Courtesy of the Dhanraj Dharamsingh/The Dharamsingh Family Collection) Natak Akademi

▼ **Mahashivaratri Procession during the 1940s in the north of Mts**

Callee Family Collection

42. S. Peerthum, 'The Tradition of the Ram Leela and Ramayana (Ram Katha)... pp. 19-20; Interview with Dr. Satteeanund Peerthum, 2016.

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