

## [Conference Explores India's Diaspora](#)

Category : [December 1993](#)

Published by Anonymous on Dec. 02, 1993

# Conference Explores India's Diaspora

On August 21st Sir Anerood Jugnauth, Prime Minister of Mauritius, opened the International Conference on the Indian Diaspora. The 3-day gathering on the island nation focused on the history, conditions and future of "Mother India's children abroad."

Mauritius provided a perfect setting for the conference, having received several waves of emigr[?]s from India. Their experience has been typical of overseas Indians in rising from indentured servitude to higher living standards. Mauritius is unique in that this is the only country of the diaspora where Indians constitute a majority and Hindus are in political control. It was organized by the Human Service Trust under the aegis of the Ministry of Arts and Culture of the Government of Mauritius to coincide with the first Mahasamadhi anniversary of Human Service Trust founder Swami Krishnanand Saraswati. The conference was attended by 200 delegates from 13 countries. Coming from India were a government delegation led by Dhanik Lal Mandal (Governor of the State of Haryana), 78 members of the Antar Rashtriya Sahayog Parishad and a number of former Indian politicians.

The conference divided its deliberations into 3 separate sessions, political, socio-economic and cultural affairs. It called for unity and a sense of mission and purpose among Indians to ensure their full participation in the work for global peace and prosperity. The conference resolutions appealed for: the United Nations to include India as a permanent member of the Security Council in view of the fact that India and its overseas children represent one-fifth of the human race; global disarmament; an end to discrimination against Indians in various nations; more leniency for Indians overseas in admissions to institutions of higher learning in India; setting up an Overseas Indian Development Bank, Overseas Indian Databank, separate communications channels through India's satellite network and a permanent international organization for overseas Indians.

Conference reports and literature all observed that people of Indian origin overseas are united by their common pride in India's great ancient culture and civilization. With references to the ancient spread of Hinduism throughout Southeast Asia, quotes from the Vedas and citations of the strength overseas Indians get from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the unstated ancient culture referred to was clearly Hindu based. Of course Christians and Muslims also emigrated, and the conference followed non-sectarian lines, but Hindus comprise 75% of the Indian diaspora, which means the scattering of a people with a common origin.

## Across the Oceans

Many Hindus, even those who are part of the diaspora, do not really know much about it. With Mauritius as the example we will recount a short history. The modern era diaspora began slowly in the late 1700's as colonial powers established trading with India. Throughout the world, French, British, Dutch and Portuguese had been using African slaves to grow sugar cane to meet the demand of the European market. The abolition of slavery by Britain in 1833 forced planters to look for new labor in India. Thus began the indentured labor system bringing Indians to South and East Africa, Mauritius, Reunion, Fiji, the Caribbean countries of Suriname, Guyana, Trinidad and the old Asian nations of Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

Placed strategically on the sea route from Europe to India, emigration to Mauritius began early in January, 1729, when Pondicherry's French governor, Dumas, sent 100 boys and girls, aged 8 to 18, and 95 artisans to Mauritius to build Port Louis harbor, the first French Indian Ocean naval base. They were given land and, despite official ordinances requiring conversion to Catholicism, allowed to practice their religion freely. The Tamils brought their pujas and their culture. A rare traditional Agamic Sivalinga temple, one of Mauritius's oldest, still stands at Camp Diable.

The British took over Mauritius in 1810, allowed French landowners to keep their holdings and converted the island from naval and commercial interests to sugar cane production. The first shiploads of 1,500 indentured laborers, "coolies," arrived from Madras in 1829. Mauritius had 19,000 Indians in 1835, 77,966 by 1851, 208,899 by 1869, and 455,000 by 1961, fully 70% of the population. The later ships brought Telegus from South India and Marathis and Hindis (who became the

majority) from Bombay and Calcutta. A similar timeline applies to the other European colonies.

Wherever they went, indentured laborers were treated like the slaves they replaced. Hundreds died on ships. Living in plantation camps, beaten, unpaid, underfed, disrespected with no family or future, they often committed suicide, or when ill, hid away in the forest, deliberately invoking fever's delirious deliverance from hell on earth. The first positive development was leaving the camps to recreate Indian villages and reestablish extended families. Religious culture, Ram Kathas, pujas, festivals like Kavadi and Maha Sivaratri kept everyone bound together.

In Mauritius in the early 1900's a new breed began to work for Indian rights in concert with Gandhi's efforts in South Africa and in India. Later, Mauritians started going back to India and abroad for education. While a few French families firmly held the plantations and the island's big money, a new elite, educated Indian community gradually dominated the religious, social and administrative infrastructure. Mauritius was granted independence in 1968, and the Hindi community took over the political reins. In less than thirty years Mauritius has gone from being one of the poorest countries to a state of relative prosperity. There are still, of course, illiterate villagers who cut cane all day and struggle at a subsistence level. But Mauritius is the sole nation of the diaspora where Hindus, 52% of the nation, became the government.

From 1965 to today, the latest efflux of emigr[?]s-a stream of Indian professionals, doctors, engineers, scientists to USA and Canada, has swelled Indians abroad to more than 20 million. With them you will find their temples, gurudwaras, mosques, festivals, religious culture-and major problems.

## Identity Crisis

The most serious problem of the diaspora is the crisis in cultural identity and the generational transmission of religion. The tough climb from the plantation to the executive suites required aping everything western. Most educated Mauritian Hindus live like Frenchmen. Emphasis on Indian languages and regional ethnic Indian social identities has failed to prevent the integration of anti Hindu values into

the core of the Indian psyche. Embarrassed to wear dhoti and jupa shirts on the streets of Kuala Lumpur, Port Louis or San Francisco, men attend weddings in tuxedos. Youth, cut off from India, are completely mesmerized by materialism and their place in the sophisticated future of an information age. They see themselves not as Indians, but as Africans or Mauritians, members of TV's global order. Despite the work of many organizations, this group of young Hindus are still not well educated in fundamental religious principles. Faced with racial discrimination-"dot busters" in America, skinheads in England, neo-Nazis in Germany and regressive French snobbery in Mauritius-youth opt for assimilation into western culture. With reports from Baleshwar Agarwal and Rajen Manick and data from A Historical Atlas of South Asia

### An Appeal For Data

Hinduism Today International Editorial offices serve as a key networking center. Our research reveals a lack of up-to-date, integrated, accessible data on the current state of the diaspora which should also now include Sri Lankan Tamils. Please send current data from your country. Include: current census of Indians and Sri Lankans, percentage Hindus, breakdown by language group, history of immigration, current social and vocational conditions, chief residence locations, active Hindu temples, organizations and leaders.