Research article

Redefining the Identity of People of Indian Origin in Mauritius

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Abstract

In the 19th century, Indian indentured labour went to Mauritius, facilitated by the European colonisers to accomplish their ambitious goal of dominating the world politically, economically and culturally. After the completion of the indenture period, Indians had little option but to stay in the new land as their zeal to return to India was sapped due to anticipated ostracisation by their respective communities. Despite the unique evolution of the identity and status of Indians in Mauritius, it has generated very little debate in academia. This article will attempt to understand whether the people of Indian origin in Mauritius can be termed as Indian diaspora at present or they have outgrown that status and evolved to attain an identity that can be defined as being 'beyond Indian diaspora'. I argue that Indians in Mauritius were positioned in the wider Mauritian society in such a way that did not satisfy the criteria of them being referred to as diaspora, and, they have acquired a specific set of cultural, social and economic capital that brings them closer to being considered as Mauritian natives.

Keywords: diaspora, hybridity, ethnic identity, people of Indian origin, *desi*.

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1. Introduction

Any movement of people is a consequence of some social, economic or political global inequity or due to some relentless global crisis. Migration brings out changes not only in the conception of physical space, but also of identity and cultural understanding. A large-scale migration across borders of nation states challenged the idea of modern state system formed after the Peace Treaty of Westphalia[i] in 1648. The process of globalisation further debilitated the porous borders and weakened the psychological barriers, socially created superiority of races, political hegemony, economic predominance or military might of some to the disadvantage of others. At the same time, global issues and global insecurities brought the whole world on the same platform. The concepts gaining significant importance such as global citizens, cultural pluralism and

predominance of human rights over nations' rights have all contributed to deconstruct the general notion of bounded territorial identity. The movement of people is not only physical, but also includes the whole baggage of social, emotional and cultural idiosyncrasies, which do not allow mechanical embedding in the new land. It had to be negotiated at every phase of settling down. Migration of Indians to Mauritius took place to facilitate the desperation of the colonisers to accomplish their irrational goal of dominating the world politically, economically and culturally.

A large-scale 19th-century migration of Indians to Africa became a defining feature of colonialism, meant to provide plantation labour to Mauritius; and later came free Indians. It emerged as an opportunity for the British colonists when they realised that certain categories of Indians dissatisfied with the conditions at home could be lured and transported to the plantations as indentured labour. They were replacing slaves who left the plantations after the abolition of slavery in 1830s. Marginalised and insecure in Mauritius, the Indians always thought of returning to India, but that never happened for most of them. After the completion of indenture period, many stayed back in Mauritius as their zeal sapped due to the fear of being ostracised on their return to India. Their second mobility came after the completion of the indenture period when they migrated from isolated plantation estates to villages and formed communities there. The migrants tried to reconstruct a new social organisation based on traditional (Indian) society, but negotiated the realities of the new home, with a new identity.

The process of adaptation and adoption of others' cultural traits was unconsciously internalised, and it had a bearing on their psyche and personality. The changes in real time and space underlay the evolution of Indians in Mauritius, who, in physical appearance, remained akin to Indians, but their tradition, language and culture displayed signs of cultural distance from those of Indians. With every succeeding generation, this distance became even wider and lessened the lament to return to the homeland. The present young generation does express some emotional fascination for India as a land of their ancestors, but certainly resonates 'Mauritianess', Mauritian nationalism and they are Mauritians in the true sense. A brief discussion of Mauritian history will provide some insight into the understanding of the changing dynamics of identity formation of Indian migrants in Mauritius.

Mauritius is a small island covering an area of 720 sq. miles to the south of the equator in the West Indian Ocean. It is a volcanic island with topography that includes a dry desert, high central plateau, plains and dead mountains. Mauritius was uninhabited until discovered by Arabs[ii] in the 16th century. Then the Portuguese visited the Island and named the three islands including Mauritius, Rodrigues and Réunion Island Mascarenes. Due to their larger goal of controlling trade in India, they did not colonise Mascarenes despite staying there for almost three-quarters of the century. The Dutch were the first to settle in 1598 and named it Mauritius. They introduced a large number of crops and many animals to the country. The Dutch failed to develop the Island for settlement and so abandoned it in 1710 but left a few runaway slaves behind who were brought from Madagascar.

The French took over the Island in 1715 and renamed it Ile de France (Island of France). The slaves residing there had developed their own form of linguistic exchange that later developed into French-based Creole[iii] after intensive interaction with the French. During the French colonisation, more slaves were brought from Madagascar and India. Besides slaves,

merchants, artisans, shopkeepers and domestic help were also imported from India. Ile de France became strategically important for the French as it became a critical naval base for them to intercept British ships moving towards India. France lost Mauritius to Britain in 1810. The Act of Capitulation of 1810 and the Treaty of Paris of 1814 specified that the Mauritians could retain their cultural traits, such as their religion, customs and languages as was the provision during the French rule. French culture remained the dominant ethos and English was used for a limited purpose by the judiciary. French and Creole continued as the *lingua franca*[iv] of the country. To intensify the economic development of the Island, the British began to import Indian agricultural labour and slaves.

After the abolition of slavery, the shortage of labour in the plantations of some of the British colonies led to the recruitment of indentured labour from India. It enabled the intensification of the economic development of the Island. Mauritius, which never had any original inhabitants, kept on adding peoples of different nationalities for the development of the embryonic Island. But the Colonists who initially seized the land and controlled the politics and economy became the (il)legitimate owners of Mauritius and the dominant power. By the twentieth century, economic and developmental needs changed, altering the demography of the Island drastically. The percentage of people of Indian origin increased to almost 70 percent.[v] The relation between people of different nationalities was purely economic, and dominant cultural practices were non-existent. In such a situation, the conceptual opposition between the 'host' and 'foreigners' becomes futile as the supposed 'hosts' were also migrants, who came a little earlier in time than the latter ones.

Indentured Indians were made to live in the estate camps of the plantations they were attached to. Indians on one estate camp had little contact with the Indians of the other plantations, though intra-plantation contacts between different groups were intensive which aided in the formation of a new amorphous identity for Indians. Teelock (2001) argues that it was in the estate camps that 'Indo-Mauritian' culture arose due to the proximity of different castes, linguistic groups and religious groups. She found that "the new culture was heavily influenced by the work experience, by the seasonal cycles of the sugar production and the recognition of the power structure on the plantation (2001: 248-9)." Even Ramhota & Govinden (1998) noted the influence of secular factors facilitating different ethnic groups to participate in common Mauritian rituals. Apparently, syncretism of different cultures ensued.

After leaving the estate camps, Indians re-established themselves in the villages and towns. The longing for home and traditional practices resurfaced, providing impetus to set up cultural edifices and structures. In the process of rebuilding their cultural complex retrieved from their memory, they could recreate only a quasi-cultural pattern and not a complete social system as it existed in India. The main principle of social organisation in India is the caste system,[vi] which could not be replicated. It required the existence of all the social groups of the parent (Indian) social organisation which was missing in Mauritius. The Indian community remained an agglomeration of different segmentary groups juxtaposed together. These circumstances called for aligning and realigning of social relations at several levels: first at the national level with the people of other ethnicities; second, with the people of other regions of India; and third, with the people of different social castes and categories.

The three facts that are to be underscored are: first, even initially Indians, despite being a diasporic community, were in the *majority,* not the minority; second, the *absence* of the 'host' community in the factual sense with indigenous roots; and third, Indians' political and economic aspirations, their grit and endurance created a situation that made them comparatively sooner one of the leading communities in Mauritius. These three uniqueness of the Indian community played a significant role in forging a distinctive identity.

The adjustments within the community and shifting dynamics with the other communities shaped the formation of a new transmuted identity. And to define this identity becomes very challenging because of the core 'Indianness' factor. Is 'Indianness' of Indians in Mauritius same as that of Indians in India? The answer is 'no' as the 'Indianness' is moulded in different social milieus — by the composite Mauritian society in the former and by the Indian social system in the latter. As Eriksen says,

> Indians in a poly-ethnic society outside of India cannot adequately be viewed simply as Indians. They are Indians embedded in a particular historical and socio-cultural context, and this fact is an inextricable part of their life — even those aspects of their life, which pertain to their very Indianness. (1992: 161)

The identity of Indians in Mauritius though is based on Indianness brought from India, but it took a different trajectory influenced by French, British, Chinese, African and wider Mauritian society. The question then arises whether their identity be determined with respect to their acquired home or their ancestral homeland. Or should they be defined as a hybrid group, an ethnic group, or to be understood as Indian diaspora or as a category that has outgrown all these terminologies and descriptions? Or whether their identity is to be determined by perceptions of self and others.

2. Hybridity

Did Indians in Mauritius experience hybridity and form a hybrid group? Hybridity is a process, which is lived through by all the communities everywhere. Hybridity becomes self-evident where ambivalent identity is reflected. Scholars have given different views on hybridity. Hutnyk (2005) says that "hybridity has come to mean all sorts of things to do with mixing and combination in the moment of cultural exchange." Hoon (2006: 159) states that "the term 'hybridity' traditionally carried the connotation of being 'impure', 'racially contaminated' and genetically 'deviant' in social evolution theory… However, in the late twentieth century, 'hybrid' and 'hybridity' have been re-appropriated to signal cultural synthesis. Hybridity is tied to the idea of cultural syncretism." Lo (2000) calls it "new consensual culture of fusion and synthesis". She refers to it as 'happy hybridity' as it "celebrates the proliferation of cultural difference to the extent where it can produce a sense of political indifference to underlying issues of political and economic inequalities (2000: 152-53)." The commonality in all these definitions is that hybridity conveys the mixing or fusion of cultures or, in general, as is often said, 'creolisation' of cultures. The terms like 'cultural synthesis', 'cultural syncretism', 'consensual cultures' 'happy hybridity' all can be seen as anticipated outcomes at the juncture of cultural exchange without much contestation. Indians in Mauritius do exhibit fusion or

ambivalence in their cultural traits, but this does not mean that the evolution of their cultural complex has stagnated and there will be no more transformation.

Ang (2003) says "hybrid implies unsettling of identities" and she further says while describing her own identity as "suspended in-between: neither truly Western nor authentically Asian; embedded in the West, yet always partially disengaged from it; disembedded from Asia yet, somehow, enduringly attached to it emotionally." Ang's pragmatic understanding of hybrid is inclusive of both positive and negative reflections, which all migrants face in the situation of an identity crisis. Her discussion on hybrid envisages identity as an entity and understands hybridity through the shifting frames of identity whereas Hutnyk, Hoon and Lo visualise hybridity as a process of cultural intermixing that shapes a distinct transformed identity.

A valid argument is that hybridity presumes the purity of cultural traits prior to the process of intermixing of cultures. Defining the purity of culture is again a challenging task. In fact, pure culture is an illusion and as Gilroy (1994: 54-5) says that "the idea of hybridity, of intermixture, presupposes two anterior purities... [there] isn't any anterior purity." And, especially, cultural purity for Indians is an elusive term as India has been for many centuries well integrated with distant worlds and exposed to other cultures that have left an indelible mark on its cultural complex. Thus, the Indians who went to Mauritius cannot be said to carry 'pure' Indian culture with them. Moving to Mauritius added new dimensions to their cultural baggage. It is not only people who migrate, even people living in their own countries experience varying influences and consequent impacts. In Mauritius, Indians definitely experienced the influence of several cultures that led to cultural modifications and "unsettled identities" as Ang said (2003). They are called Indians by the larger Mauritian community but are Mauritian for the rest of the world and Indian-origin people in Mauritius or overseas Indians for India. The process of hybridity does create some homogenisation of coexisting cultures; in the long run, diluting ethnic identity.

3. Do Indians in Mauritius form an Ethnic group?

The other issue is, can the Indian-origin people in Mauritius be considered an ethnic group presently? How do migrant groups become ethnic groups? Regarding ethnicity, Oommen's (1997) argument is that people, who constitute the nation, have sustained coincidence of territory and culture and when there is some disconnect between them as in the case of migration then ethnicity arises. Paradoxically, both the formation and dilution of ethnicity are the outcome of a disconnect between territory and culture. He further says that due to ethnicity, some categories are considered 'outsiders' or not indigenes as Indians in Mauritius were initially considered. But nationals are always 'insiders'. In this sense, Indians who initially settled in Mauritius can be understood as ethnic, but not their progeny down nearly two centuries whose evolved culture has sustained ties with the Mauritian soil only. For them, there is no disconnect between territory and culture sculpted and thriving in Mauritius.

Barth defines ethnicity in terms of the genetic purity of the group and cultural distinctness. Barth (1969: 10-11) says if a group is to be considered as an ethnic group, it should be "a largely biologically self-perpetuating, shares fundamental cultural values, realised in overt unity in cultural forms, makes up a field of communication and interaction and has a membership which identifies

itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order." Barth's definition of ethnicity focuses on the importance of endogamy with cultural values that are distinct from others. Indians, when they arrived in Mauritius, did form such an ethnic group, but have not continued to be a biologically self-perpetuating group as intermarriages between different ethnic groups have been observed. Also, the ample cultural diversity of Indians within provides spaces and instances for the blurring of boundaries and distinctiveness.

Appadurai (1996: 13) stressing on the cultural differences defines ethnicity as "naturalised group identity" requiring consciousness of cultural attributes and their naturalisation. He says that ethnic group identity is not formed of primordial ties but requires "mobilisation of difference". Thus, ethnic identity requires the naturalisation of identity and then mobilisation of cultural differences. Both Barth and Appadurai stress on the cultural differences that differentiate one group from the other. Barth's primary stress is on maintaining the biological purity of the ethnic group and then on maintaining culturally distinct traits. Appadurai focuses on naturalisation and mobilisation of cultural differences to form ethnic identity. But the core cultural traits of Indians expressing distinctiveness have mellowed down over the period and become more symbolic to form a 'symbolic ethnicity' in the sense the term is being used by Herbet J. Gans (1979). Indians in Mauritius are no longer mobilising differences to sustain their distinct ethnic identity. Acceptance of supra-ethnic traits shows little resentment as is evidenced in the fusion of cultural expressions like food habits, festivals, dress, way of life and ancestral language.

Ancestral languages play a very important role in maintaining and sustaining ethnicity. Is ancestral language contributing towards the sustenance of the ethnic identity of Indians in Mauritius? Aaliya (2003:69) says that "ancestral languages act as markers of ethnicity... it seems that some Mauritians are (re-)negotiating their ethnic identity through language. Creole has supplanted the original ancestral language of these Mauritians." The number of speakers of Creole, French and English has increased, whereas the usage of Indian languages is on the decline according to the data of the Housing and Population Census 2011. Aaliya found that "Creole is transcending ethnic and social barriers and is used by people of various ethnic and social backgrounds (p73)." The shift of a greater number of people speaking ethnic languages to speaking Creole reflects a movement towards the process of constructing a composite Mauritian identity. Similarly, dress and food habits are also losing their earlier distinctiveness. European clothes and fusion foods have become a great equaliser as elsewhere.

The 'in-between', hybrid, fusion, cross-culture, and Creole-like expressions became terms of reference for the Indians in Mauritius. But unlike elsewhere, in the veiled consciousness surface, unacknowledged acceptance and tolerance for the Indians by the quasi-hosts (French) as Indians were gradually permitted to share at par economic, political and social space. The successive diasporic generations certainly became different from the previous ones, more distant from and less indulgent in the so-called traditional cultural practices of the original homeland. The older generations reluctantly gave way to hybridity and 'pollution' for the formation of a new identity. 'Pollution' here is seen as the influence of traits of other cultures affecting the purity of culture that their forefathers brought. They have broken down the prejudices. Thus, the Indians in Mauritius are experiencing change that is causing them to move towards acquiring a more 'Mauritian' identity rather than reinforcing their ethnic identity. Their present identity does not

strictly fit any definition of ethnic group. The initial ethnic character has given way to the construction of a new pro-cosmopolitan identity. Identity markers are diluting from within due to weakening emotional connect with the ancestral culture and from outside due to external factors, which are mostly secular. The identity of Indians in Mauritius has moved beyond the defining features of the ethnic group in the society that Eriksen (1997) characterises as 'post-ethnic'.

Initially, it is always the ethnic identity that enables the formation of a diaspora outside the homeland. Appadurai (1996) and Anthias (1998) argue that ethnic identity is the main principle of the social organisation of the diaspora. Does the formation of a diaspora bring about a major shift in the understanding of the character of the ethnic group forming that diaspora? Yes, ethnic groups are well-defined groups with a cultural distinctiveness within a given territory. Diaspora as defined by most scholars is a boundaryless and imagined community with the defining feature of being trans-national. Anderson (1983) says that diasporas are not "natural identities but imagined communities." To define imagined communities is difficult as, obviously, they are not territorially bound communities and what bounds them is the fact of migrating from a common homeland and their shared experiences. Non-resident Indians in other parts of the world do form a diaspora as they have trans-national connect with Indians and other Indian diaspora, but this is not the case for Indians in Mauritius. The experience of Indian-origin people in Mauritius is *unique* and the nature of their transnational connect is debatable. It is not the same as that of other Indian diaspora who connect more with the Indians in other places and with homeland; and constantly have to negotiate with the host community. Also, the length of sustained stay in one place outside India of the Indian diaspora in Mauritius is far longer than any Indian diaspora elsewhere.

Oft quoted, Safran (1994: 84) listed several criteria for defining diaspora, but with the main stress on return to the homeland and maintenance of the prosperity of the homeland. Indians in Mauritius do not express India to be their homeland anymore and a place to return to. India for them may be a holy land or place for pilgrimage, but not a homeland. Most Indian-origin Mauritians would prefer to visit Canada, Australia, or France than India, though India's main attraction may be that it is an ancestral homeland or place of origin of the religion and culture they practise, so maybe visited for pilgrimage and for curiosity only. The Indian-origin people in Mauritius consider themselves to be integral members of the Mauritian community grown organically over the period. Indians' visible dynamic role in the country's affairs helped them not to remain an imaginary community but become a territorially bound category having a place in the Mauritian social hierarchy. Their dominant position in society undermines any sense of marginalisation, alienation and rootlessness.

Hall (1990: 235) says that diaspora experience can be defined "not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity, which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those, which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves as new through transformation and difference." Hall gives the impression that the diasporic stage never ends and the diasporic identity is perpetually transforming and the hybridity so arising keeps on shaping the identity of the diaspora further. Hence diasporic identity is not constant and keeps on evolving with the change in situation and interacting groups. But still, it is understood within the parameters of the definition of diaspora, a transnational community and there is no paradigm shift while defining it.

Butler (1997:4) raises a pertinent question, that is, "when do people cease to be diasporic?" Or when does their identity reflect a change in the status of not being diaspora?

Definitions describing diaspora as people from outside the host nation and emphasising a longing to return to the ancestral land remain limited for describing Indians in Mauritius. Clifford (1997: 255) says "diasporic identifications reach beyond ethnic status... imparting a sense of being a 'people' with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the host nation." According to such a definition, all Americans except the indigenous Red Indians should be considered as diaspora. The case is not so. They are very much Americans. As Harutyunyan (2012: 7-8) says, "The popularity of Diaspora studies and the blurred borders of the theoretical framework leads to the universalisation of Diaspora, which as Roger Brubaker argues, paradoxically means the disappearance of Diaspora... If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so." This provides elasticity to the understanding of diaspora identity. In the case of Mauritius, all different social categories were diaspora initially, and as per Brubaker (2005:3), then no one can be called a diaspora including Indians. Thus, diaspora also becomes a relative term that can be understood either in relation to the host land or homeland or other social groups in the host country and also with reference to the length of time since arrival. Earlier migrants merged with the hosts, whereas later ones formed a distinct diasporic group. The later diaspora, after some time, becomes quasi-host for still later migrants. The process is not so linear and not as simple as it appears, but each successive generation becomes closer to being more Mauritian. In such a situation, the progeny of Indians, who migrated to Mauritius in the 19th and early 20th century cannot be adequately referred to as Indian diaspora, but later Indian entrants can be. The present generations of the earlier migrants can be considered to have an identity beyond ethnic status and even beyond the diaspora.

Scholars try to locate diaspora in relation to the common homeland. In the case of Indian-origin people in Mauritius, it becomes problematic situating their homeland. It is not one entity 'India' that their forefathers' homeland is associated with. Homeland or '*desh*' in Hindi, as referred to by Indians, conveys different meanings to different people. *Desh* can mean the country, India; province, region or district in India; or even a village. *Desh* also has many undertones. So many generations down the line, the present generation might not be able to locate their real origins in India. The original homeland they knew from the shared collective memories orally transmitted may not exist today as they were told. The geographical reorientation of territories, historical processes, the partition of India, urbanisation, colonisation and decolonisation has changed the political geography of India to the extent that they would find it difficult to pinpoint the place known to be their ancestral homeland. Also, the native places or local origins they knew may not be referred to by the same name. The inability to determine their ancestral birthplace could have weakened the bond of Indians in Mauritius with the ancestral homeland; and also diminished emotional attachment to the homeland. Belongingness to India may not generate that intense emotion as belonging to their original local region would have. The loosening of the bond with India and the lack of a source of emotional belongingness created a vacuum in to search for an alternative homeland. Incidentally, the plantations they initially came to in Mauritius provided that space and became their putative homeland.

There can be no denying that the Indian community in Mauritius has continuously evolved from being a 'diaspora', a marginalised group to a dominant community as can be observed in

their political and economic ascendance. They have formed a composite group that is neither bound by ancestral homeland affiliations nor has a desire to return. Secular ideas and global culture are shaping their worldview, Mauritian and not the Indian worldview. Using a hyphenated nomenclature is limiting the identity description that they have outgrown. The fact to be emphasised is that Indians in Mauritius observe the so-called 'Indian cultural practices and traditions' only symbolically, but their earnest nationalism and emotional connect is definitely with Mauritius. Also, it should be underscored that the culture and traditions they follow may have originated from the cultural baggage their forefathers brought from India, but it has transformed into a form that is only Mauritian now; the garb is Indian but innately 'unlike' Indian. Indians of India may not be able to relate to this set of cultural traits of Indians in Mauritius. They follow them not because they want to reaffirm their affiliation to India or to stress their Indianness, but because it is theirs and grown out of Mauritian soil. It has a well-defined and distinct Mauritian character and identity. But to define that identity is a challenge. It will be unfitting to refer to them as Indo-Mauritians or Indian diaspora or Indian ethnic group. At this point in time, can they be referred to as the indigenous people of Mauritius?

4. Shifting Identities

Since the time of the migration of Indians to Mauritius, their identities have been modifying with the changing political, economic and social dynamics of the Mauritian society only. When Indians moved to Mauritius, they were 'Indians in Mauritius', maybe an ethnic group. Then due to the global large-scale migration, there developed the field of diasporic studies; and transnational communities with a common homeland began to be called diaspora. Indians in Mauritius became the 'Indian diaspora'. They showed all signs of experiencing hybridity and possessing Indianness that later could not be associated with the Indianness of India. The multiple meanings of Indianness are another issue. Does the Indianness pertain to the set of cultural traits brought from India by the Indian indentured labour, or Indianness arising due to the cultural practices that evolved on the Mauritian soil by the progeny of Indian indentured labour or Indianness associated with the set of culture and traditions practised presently in India?

The Indianness of Indians in Mauritius is complex; it is an elusive blend of all the above but with an explicit preponderance of none. At the same time, it creates a distinct Mauritian character, almost akin to being indigenous Mauritians, nonetheless, retaining the Indian phenotype. Others call them Indian as they reflect symbolic Indian identity despite their Indianness being different from the Indianness of Indians. While talking of Indo-Trinidadians, Eriksen (1992:173) says that "however, their Indianness is a New World Indianness; it is a peculiar brand of Indianness which has grown out of the soil of Trinidad…" Similarly, Mauritian Indianness, if at all it can be called Indianness, arises not out of the Indian way of life and Indian worldview but out of Mauritian cosmology and Mauritian way of life. They are labelled as Indian only because of their genetic connect. They are 'Indian' due to biology, but not due to their self-perception and cultural matrix. They are only Mauritians.

Even the Mauritian constitution adopted in 1968 does not recognise any category as 'Indo-Mauritians'. The four categories of the population for official purposes according to the Mauritian constitution are Hindus (52%), Muslims (17%), Sino-Mauritians (2%), and the general population

(29%). Coloured Population/Mulattos, Franco-Mauritian and Afro-Mauritians are categories included in the general population. It is interesting to note that the terms used to refer to different categories provide some insight into the perceptions of identity envisaged by the Mauritian community in general. Here, terms like Sino-Mauritian, Franco-Mauritian and Afro-Mauritian are used with reference to the original homeland of the diasporic group, but 'Indo-Mauritians' are not mentioned and are referred to as 'Hindus' and 'Muslims', a religion-based categorisation. Probably, this is the acceptance of the diminishing significance of the original homeland identity quotient of Indians in Mauritius. Thus, it can be concluded that they are no longer a diaspora in Mauritius. The religious faith remains the marker of their distinctiveness. Or probably even the Constitution accepts their dominant position and attains the quasi-indigenous status in the society. They have evolved into a not yet definable and expressible complex of out-growing their Indo-Mauritian identity and being at the threshold of permanently being called 'Mauritians'.

I propose the term *desis*[vii] for the category of Indians in Mauritius, who decisively identify themselves *not* with the Indians or transnational Indians, but only with the established 'Mauritian community'. *Desi* means indigenous or local in Sanskrit. They have transformed from being diaspora to *desis*. It is not just a matter of time before the diaspora becomes a *desi* but needs predominantly an emotional and psychological shift in the reckoning of the self-perception and affinity towards the (host) land on the part of the *desis* and the acceptance by the others as being 'not foreigners', neither *persona non grata*[viii]. This has been observed very clearly in the Indian-origin people in Mauritius. The Indians in Mauritius whose forefathers came about two centuries ago, genetically may not have undergone much change, but express a significant shift in the orientation of their culture and identity away from Indian, and towards Mauritian, and at the same time, acquiring and sharing the cultural space in the Mauritian social organisation and attaining identity prerequisites pronouncedly Mauritian. This category I call *'desi Indians of Mauritius,'* having determined affiliation with 'Mauritius' and displaying the spirit of Mauritian nationalism. *Desi* Indians of Mauritius should refer only to the progeny of Indians, who can now be considered to be of Mauritian origin only.

The shift in the self-perception and perceptions of others creates a matrix for the formation of a new identity beyond ethnicity and beyond diaspora. Cross-cultural influences are clearly visible in the *desi* Indians of Mauritius, in their language, dressing style, food habits and, above all, in the mindset. Their values are reflective more of Mauritius, distinct from that of India's. The experiences and situations have interacted in such a way to carve out an identity that is more distinctly Mauritian, a *desi* Mauritian. It does not create a limbo, a hyphenated identity but specifically a Mauritian. Neither has it remained an imagined community but of Mauritius, a bounded territory. Both *desi Indians of* Mauritius and other Mauritians have accepted in their psyche their sense of belonging with the Mauritians and Mauritius. Also, there is a strong visualisation of the *desi* as being different from both — the Indian diaspora in Mauritius and the natives of India.

Desi is different from diaspora. Diaspora expresses the origin with reference to the ancestral homeland, or imagined community and borderless nation as Anderson (1983) said. It is almost the acknowledgement and acceptance of the virtual community and virtual supra-nation without defining the characters of its members and the boundary of the supra-nation. *Desi* does not tend to form an imagined nationless community as diaspora does. It expresses and suggests

'tending to be indigenous' of the country. It defines their identity with respect to a real geographical space and attributes a social space in the social formation of the host community. Clifford's definition of diaspora also argues for retaining of and stress on the foreign origin with little consideration for naturalisation as he says, "diasporic identifications reach beyond ethnic status within the composite, liberal state", imparting a "sense of being a 'people' with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the host nation (1997, 255)." *Desi* immediately and decisively conveys the origin and belongingness to 'this' country, whereas diaspora always rakes up a sense of foreignness. *Desi* and diaspora generate a differing sense of being accepted by the wider society, *desi* is associated with 'we' and diaspora with 'they' feeling. *Desi* helps to reduce the distance between different people claiming to be indigene.

The diversity of psychological reckoning of the motherlands also has created heterogeneity in the diaspora community that has provided space for a large number of terms to denote them, depending on their status and situation. Some of the terms commonly used for Indians in Mauritius are Indian diaspora, Indian community, People of Indian Origin, Non-Resident Indians or hybrids as Indo-Mauritians. All these terms inherently demonstrate firm bonding and strong association with India and Indian origin. Conceptually, *desi* has altogether a different connotation with an orientation towards being 'indigene' or 'native' of the nation they migrated to, of that nation, of that soil. The inherent assumption is that they are no longer torn between dual identities. But in actual sense, there is no outright escape from the ancestral genes. The term, '*desi* Indians of Mauritius' is itself a paradoxical term with *desi* referring to being the 'indigene' of the country, but the nomenclature also carries a qualifier 'Indian' expressing otherwise. *Desi* will set them apart from the diaspora and 'Indian' will be a value-neutral addendum only to distinguish one social category from the other in Mauritius. Also, *desi* immediately weakens the perceptions of being an 'Outsider' or the 'Other' as may be expressed in 'Indian' and 'Indian diaspora'. Why is 'Indian' to be infixed? It refers to one of the social categories within Mauritian society and is not a referent of any origin or designating status in the social hierarchy.

Desi shows psychological acceptance of Mauritius as their homeland and *desis* being embraced as equal members of the Mauritian society after sharing the same space and orientation for several generations. *Desis* of a country are specific to that country and *cannot* be considered members of any other country as *desis*. *Desi* Indians of Britain will be Indian origin people whose several generations have lived experiences of British society and Britain is their homeland. Similarly, *Desi* Indians of America and *Desi* Indians of Germany and so on. Diaspora becomes *desi* over a period. The time period for any 'diaspora' to acquire the status of 'indigene' becomes one of the critical factors. The time period is again a subjective count, certain diaspora becomes 'indigene' faster, but some may not for a long time as is the case of African-origin people in America. Probably, this relates to the power equation between the 'host' and the 'homeland' or maybe, to a greater extent, to the racial factor. Indians in Mauritius had to re-work, reform and reconfigure their relation only with the other migrant communities since the host community was 'non-existent' in the real sense. Then, in relation to the other communities, Indian origin people in Mauritius have acquired a new identity and not in relation to the host community.

Desi is different from Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which migrants carry with them. It is different from Hall's (1990: 230) usage of '*presence*', which is used for analysing the Caribbean cultural identities. Both refer to cultural identities carried over different generations by

migration and remigration, but always retaining the identity referent as the original homeland of the ancestors. Here *desi* is not a determinant of identity as such, but predominantly expresses the status of being Mauritian and being indigene of Mauritius. That status may signify or suggest the identity. *Desis* cannot be banished or exorcised from their country whereas diaspora has an element of uncertainty. Diaspora remains heterogeneous, but *desi* is more homogenous. The critical point of time when diaspora slips into *desis* cannot be defined though. This critical phase in the process of identity formation is the phase 'beyond diaspora' of becoming *desis.* It is critical because it is the threshold of status shift and associated identity. It is a point in time when the individual or the group outgrows his ascribed identity and acquires a different identity, an achieved identity that becomes a new ascribed identity. This threshold is neither physical nor imagined nor virtual but it is the commencement of psychological re-reckoning of shared identity with changed terms of referents (from India to Mauritius).

5. Conclusion

Indians in Mauritius could be termed at some earlier phase as either ethnic group or Indian diaspora with trans-national connect. Their situation and condition in Mauritius were different from other Indian migrants elsewhere. Mauritius had no original inhabitants till 16th and 17th centuries. Indians went there as slaves prior to the arrival of indentured labour in the 19th century. Indians did not have to negotiate with any established indigenous culture. Neither the French who first inhabited the island could be called 'host' as the term is generally understood because their owning and controlling of the territory was very recent in time. Since no unified Mauritian culture existed then, Indians migrated to a new land, but not to a new composite established or indigenous culture. They did not remain for long marginalised and did not long to return to their ancestral homeland. Their present identity does pose a challenge. They have attained an identity different from the one with which their forefathers were associated. The reckoning of the new identity requires a paradigmatically different orientation of understanding of identity sculpted in Mauritius and not in India. Hence the term *desi* is used to designate that identity.

The *desi* positions them amongst the indigene of Mauritius. *Desis* are different from a hybrid group though *desis* can never arise without undergoing hybridity. Hybridity is a process that is perpetually in flux. But *desi* represents a well-defined entity, a 'community' and its status at the same time. It expresses the origin of the community and becomes an identity signifier, whereas hybridity is the essential process of the formation of that identity signifier. Hybridity is a general term expressing creolisation but *desi* acquires a specific meaning of being 'indigene' with a well-defined character. *Desi* signifies indigenous origins as opposed to foreign. Hybridity downplays the opposition of the 'indigene' and 'foreign' but presents the confluence of all and becomes a phase in the modification and construction of even that which is called *desi. Desi Indians of Mauritius* are no longer an ethnic group as they are a dominant group and in majority, neither have they stagnated at the stage of being diaspora only. Diaspora is contextualised in relation to foreignness or as the transnational citizenry. The identity of *desi* Indians of Mauritius is defined in relation to Mauritius, not India. Diaspora conveys as having roots in another nation but *desi* reinforces the fact of the Mauritian root. *Desi* Indians of Mauritius are living the culture referred as the Indian culture where 'Indian' is a misnomer. It is 'their' culture grown out of

Mauritian soil and not in India. The case of people of Indian origin in Mauritius is a *unique* case of migration, multiple identities, shifting identities and acquiring a new quasi-indigene status in a short period of time. They do not form an imagined nationless community but tending to be indigenous of Mauritius. The most important is their affinity only with Mauritius and Mauritian nationalism; and *not* with India. The *Desi* Indians of Mauritius can relate more with Walt Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing" as they now have acquired legitimate Mauritian citizenship and are in a position where their patriotism and love for Mauritius is not challenged; and may connect less with Langstone Hughe's poem "I, Too, Sing America" which expresses a longing to be a legitimate American citizen and his claims to American patriotism.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

Endnotes

[i.] The Treaty of Westphalia signed in 1648 ended the thirty-year religious war in Europe. It established a new system of nation states based on the principle of sovereignty.

[ii.] Long before Europeans discovered the island of Mauritius, Arab traders have been said to have visited the island around 9th or 10th century, though there is no written authentic evidence available. They named it *Dina Arabi* (Desert Island) and some three islands with Arabic names are shown on the maps of the period at the same location as Mauritius. Even the Italian cartographer, Alberto Cantino had produced maps in 1502 that show the three Islands that represent Reunion, Mauritius and Rodrigues.

[iii.] The vernacular language of Mauritius is French-based creole language. Mauritian Creole is considered the national language of Mauritius.

[iv.] The Mauritian creole (Morisyen) is the poor cousin of French and is most widely spoken in Mauritius. It is the *lingua franca* for all ethnic groups and is also accepted as the mother tongue by most Mauritians.

[v.] 70 percent of the population of Mauritius is of Indian origin shown by the "World Fact Book" of the Central Intelligence Agency.

[vi.] Traditional Indian Hindu society consists of castes and sub-castes having a degree of social and cultural identity (Beteille (1969)). These castes are status groups and were ranked hierarchically according to the rules of ritual purity. It is the most rigid type of system of social organisation where castes in higher rank order were ritually purer than the castes in the lower social order. Membership of the caste groups was ascriptive and in theory, it was not possible to change one's caste in his lifetime. Despite this there existed channels for mobility of groups or individuals even in traditional India. The characteristic feature of the caste system was the interdependence of different castes forming a whole.

[vii.] *Desi* means local (of that place) or indigenous (origin of that place), also sometimes referred to mean pure (of things unadulterated, of people having a purity of culture). *Desi* finds its origin in Sanskrit language term '*desa*' referring to village, region or country. The earliest usage of the term *desi* is found in the *Natya Shastra* (it is the oldest surviving text elaborating on technical aspects of dramatic art and performing arts

written in Sanskrit and credited to sage Bharat Muni, compiled around 200 BCE) referring to folk dance and music meant for the pure entertainment of the common folk. It has always been understood in opposition to classical pan-Indian music and dance meant for spiritual enlightenment and for the appeasement of the gods called *Margi*. The term *desi* while referring to people means 'indigenous' but is reductive as it refers to only South Asian identity. But *desi* in Hindi would mean native not limited to being indigene of India only. In America, it has often been used imperfectly to refer to members of South Asian ancestry. Ben Zimmer, *The Wall Street Journal's* language columnist mentions American Born Confused *Desis* (ABCD) referring to the children of South Asian parents born in America and confused about their background because of their disconnect from their parental culture. Here usage of *desi* of a country. *Desi* of one country cannot be a member as *desi* of any other country. In the true sense of the term, the *desi* of India cannot be the *desi* of America or the *desi* of France.

[viii.]*Persona non grata* is a Latin word meaning a person not appreciated or unwelcomed, especially in diplomatic circles. Also refers to a foreign person whose entering or remaining in a particular country is prohibited.

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