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The Voyage of Sanskrit from India to Mauritius

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Abstract

This Research paper provides a glimpse of the voyage of Sanskrit throughout different stages beginning with its introduction by indentured labourers till its teaching at the University level in Mauritius. In 1835, when the abolition of slavery took place, indentured labourers had to be brought to Mauritius from India in order to work in the sugarcane fields. These labourers brought with them their culture, religions, and languages. Although Sanskrit was not a mother tongue of any of them, it was still a source of their culture and religion. Hence, they brought with them texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Bhagavadgītā*, and other scriptures. In this way, the Sanskrit language was indirectly introduced by the indentured labourers, or “coolies” as they were called. Later in the 20th century, with the foundation of the Arya Samaj, the propagation of Sanskrit took a new shape. Parallel to the works of the Arya Samaj, which now falls under the aegis of Arya Sabha Mauritius, other remarkable institutions or NGOs like the Arya Ravived Pracharini Sabha, the Brahman Maha Sabha, the Hindu Maha Sabha, among others, were in their ways contributing to the promotion of Sanskrit in Mauritius. However, the credit for promoting and popularizing Sanskrit in a formal manner goes to the Mahatma Gandhi Institute. It offers courses in Sanskrit for adults and children at Beginners, Basic, Foundation, and Diploma levels. At a tertiary level, B.A, M.A, M.Phil, and PhD. programs are now being offered.

Keywords: Sanskrit, Mauritius.

“History is both a form of memory and a discipline that draws on memory as source material ... ‘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...”

– John Tosh in *The Pursuit Of History*.¹

In this paper, an attempt is made firstly, to show how the Sanskrit language has undergone a tough voyage to reach Mauritius. Secondly, it will also be shown how Sanskrit was developed and sustained in difficult phases. And finally, its flourishing dimensions within the country today. This research is based on a historical survey and interviews with individuals engaged in promoting Sanskrit who are still alive.

Situated in the Indian Ocean, Mauritius is a small volcanic island with an area of 720 miles.² Despite its small territory, it is inhabited by around 1.3 million people who are heterogeneous in terms of ethnic group and religious adherence.³ The Mascarene island was first discovered by Arab traders around two centuries before the landing of the Portuguese. The Dutch settlers, who came in 1598 named it “Mauritius.” During their stay, they exploited the ebony forest and introduced sugarcane to the island. But due to unfavourable climatic conditions like cyclones, droughts and continuous hardships like pest infestations, lack of food and illnesses, they did not extend their stay in the country and the island was once again abandoned.⁴

Upon the departure of the Dutch in 1710, the French claimed Mauritius in 1715 and named it as *Ile De France*. They started their first permanent settlement in 1721.⁵ During their stay in the island, they imported slaves in huge numbers from Africa and Madagascar, as well as some from India. In 1810, the British took control over the island from the French and renamed it Mauritius. In 1835, slavery was officially abolished in Mauritius. It was then, that the “Great Experiment” of the British was applied, and indentured labourers were brought from different parts of India in order to replace the slaves and work in the sugarcane

¹ Tosh 2010: 303.

² Pavitranand 2015: 13.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Virahsawmy 2012.

⁵ Pavitranand 2015: 13.

fields. They sailed for around a whole month or even more, depending on the climatic conditions before they could reach the Mauritian shores. Upon their arrival, they were disembarked from their ships at the Apravasi Ghat, also known as “Coolie Ghat.”⁶ As Peerthum states, “Mauritius was the first country to introduce indentured Indian labourers and Apravasi Ghat was the first depot where the indentured labourers were processed.”⁷

The indentured immigrants brought with them their “intangible heritage” – namely their languages, cultures, religions, culinary heritage, stories, riddles, popular games, and traditions from India to their new home in the British colony.⁸ In some rare cases, few Indian Immigrants who came from the tradition of Śāstras did not forget to bring along with them their religious texts like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bhagavadgītā*.⁹ This fact is clearly illustrated today through a copy of the *Rāmāyaṇa* dating from the 1840s and written in the Kaithi script of north central India. It belonged to an Indian immigrant from Uttar Pradesh and was donated to be put on display at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute Folk Museum.¹⁰

Between the 1830s and 1840s, hundreds of immigrants landed from various parts of India, namely Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, among others. They were literate and semi-literate. Many of them were known as the “early pioneer Indian indentured workers.” Somehow by the middle of the 19th century, few managed to leave estate labour and achieve some social and economic mobility along with obtaining some rudimentary education.¹¹ They became the group leaders who used to hold gatherings in villages where religious discourses would take place as well as plays would be enacted for entertainment like the *Rāma Līlā*. Here, the *pañcāyata* played a very important role where elders would agree upon a common discussion or discuss about strategies, solutions to overcome evils that endangered their identity. Later, these *pañcāyatas* became popular as “*baiṭhakās*.”¹² These people used to celebrate all their religious festivals like

⁶ Peerthum 2017a: 25.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hazareesingh 1976: 40, revenaient aux traditions des “shastras.”

⁹ Peerthum 2017b.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Hazareesingh 1975: 59, cited in Dabee 2018.

¹² *Santoṣam paramam sukham*.

Divāli, Mahā Śivarātri, Rāma Navamī, Durgā Pūjā, etc., with great fervor and devotion. They would also not forget to offer their daily prayers at early dawns before starting their and at dusks before the night falls, showing their gratitude of satisfaction.¹³

In the light of the above, it would not be unjust to state that it was through immigrants that Sanskrit underwent the voyage from India to Mauritius. Though they did not have the proper knowledge of Sanskrit, Sanskrit remained alive through their prayers and religious practices. Also during their religious discourses, unknowingly, many Sanskrit words would get transmitted to people in an informal way.

It is only from the 1900s, with the foundation of the first Arya Samaj in 1903 by the trio Shri Khemlall Lallah, Guruprasad Daljeetlal and Jugmohun Gopal that the propagation of Sanskrit took a new shape.¹⁴ An Indian soldier by the name of Bholanath Tiwari came to Mauritius in 1898. Before returning to his country three years later, he left a copy of *Satyārtha Prakāsh* – “The Light of Truth” – in the hands a milk-seller named Beekharry Singh, as a token of appreciation.¹⁵ This copy of *Satyārtha Prakāsh* ultimately reached the hands of the aforementioned trio, who were highly fascinated by its teachings. They strongly believed that if its teachings be disseminated and followed, the evil practices prevalent in the Hindu society in Mauritius would definitely be eliminated.¹⁶ With this firm determination, they started to hold weekly *satsangs* with *havan*, prayers, devotional songs, and talks on the *Satyārtha Prakāsh*.¹⁷ This ultimately gave rise to the establishment of the first Arya Samaj. Unfortunately, the activities of this group could not last for long. On the other hand, *Rāmāyana* and *Gītā maṇḍalis* were set up where *ślokas*, *dohās*, and *chaupāyis* were chanted and the knowledge of wisdom inherent in the epics were imparted.¹⁸

¹³ Gangoo 2015: 1.

¹⁴ Varma 1998: 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Dabee 2018: 5.

¹⁸ Gangoo 2004: 77.

On 8th May 1911, with the help and support of Manilal Doctor, the Arya Samaj was once again founded in Mauritius, and this time in Port-Louis.¹⁹ The Mauritian society was fortunate enough to have the visit of Mahatma Gandhi in 1901, who gave his ear to the hardships that his compatriots were facing. Keeping his promise to help them, he sent Manilal Doctor to Mauritius. The latter who was a lawyer by profession helped many of them to overcome their difficulties and to get justice.

Those were dark days when illiteracy and superstitions were rife among the Hindu community. Therefore, Manilal Doctor felt the necessity of having the services of a Vedic preacher who could boost up the Arya Samaj movement which was just set up.²⁰ Ultimately, Dr. Chiranjeev Bharadwaj, accompanied by his wife Shrimati Sumangali Devi, landed in Mauritius in December of the same year. The latter was not only a highly qualified physician but also a staunch Arya Samajist and a great Vedic scholar. With his arrival, the entire Hindu community saw a new light. He devoted all his time and energy to eradicate social ills and malpractices.²¹ He had to face many difficulties in his endeavour, but to no avail. He was “endowed with an unbending nature.”²²

Despite threats made to him, Dr. Bharadwaj started teaching the *Satyārtha Prakāśa*, which contains a huge number of Sanskrit words, nominal stems, verbal roots, sūtras from the *Vyākaraṇa Mahābhāṣya*, as well as mantras and ślokas from various scriptures, such as the *Vedas*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Smṛtis*, *Upaṇiṣads*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, *Bhagavadgītā*, and *Nītiśāstras*, among others. His wife, Sumangali Devi, also helped him in the pious work of educating people and bringing social reforms and awareness against blind beliefs. She was the first Hindu woman in this country to address public gatherings.²³ In this venture, the Bharadwajs got the full support and collaboration of volunteers, including Khemlal Lallah, Guruprasad Daljeetlal, Jugmohun Gopal, Shree Moti Master, Shree Bhola Master, Shree Madholall, Shree Gayasing, and Shree Shivsharan.²⁴

¹⁹ Gangoo 2015: 133.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p.135.

²³ Ibid., p.135.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

Therefore, for those studying the *Satyārtha Prakāśa*, Sanskrit became a part and parcel of their knowledge as they had to recite the mantras and learn the verses by heart while understanding the proper meanings they conveyed.

Having worked diligently for three years, Dr Bharadwaj returned to his native land. Before his departure in 1914, Swami Swatantranand came to Mauritius to continue the missionary work thus started.²⁵ By that time, many more branches of Arya Samaj and *baiṭhakās* were established in various nooks and corners of the country to continue “the noble task of educating and training young men of the village in yoga, drama, playing musical instruments, holding debates, and organizing singing competitions.”²⁶

In due course of time, some Mauritian visionaries went to India to pursue their studies. The most famous among them who marked our history was Basdeo Bissoondoyal, who, after completing his studies, returned to his motherland in 1939.²⁷ He was greatly inspired by the teachings of swami Dayanand and highly influenced by the struggles of Mahatma Gandhi. In order to bring social and religious reforms and “to unite all sections of the Hindu community,” he founded an organization known as the Jan Andolan.²⁸ While promoting the Hindi language, he also gave a boost to Sanskrit as he was himself a scholar of Sanskrit.

In parallel to the works of Arya Samaj, in the 1930s, on one side of Mauritius, Pandit Sajivanlall was providing Sanskrit training to priests at a temple at Triolet, while, on the other side, Pandit Benimadho Mishra, father of Pandit Thakoorprasad Mishra, was coaching the Hindu Brahmin priests in Sanskrit at Vishnu Kshetra Mandir, located in St Denis, Port-Louis.²⁹ By now, many remarkable institutions or NGOs had already come into existence like the Arya Sabha Mauritius which was formed by the merging of the Arya Paropakarini Sabha and the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, the Hindi Pracharini Sabha, the Arya Ravived Pracharini Sabha, the Brahman Maha Sabha, and the Hindu Maha Sabha, and other groups. These were, in their own ways, contributing to the promotion of Sanskrit in Mauritius.

²⁵ Gangoo 2004: 89.

²⁶ Gangoo 2015: 129-130.

²⁷ Varma 1997: 4.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.10

²⁹ Interview, Narottam Mohabeer, social activist.

Until the late 1950s Sanskrit was mostly taught either during the training of priests or during discourses based on scriptures. Beginning in 1962, however, the Brahman Maha Sabha collaborated with the Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Bombay, and started the teaching and learning of Sanskrit at the Hindu Maha Sabha building. In the beginning, only three examinations took place – *Prārambha*, *Praveśa*, and *Paricaya*. In time, two additional levels were included – *Bālabodha* and *Kovida*. These five Sanskrit examinations are still conducted to this day. The credit of preparing and conducting these examinations initially is given to Pandits Jagdish Sharma and Jadunandan Sharma Dhoopun.³⁰ Today this responsibility is being shouldered by Shree Hanumanprasad Dube Geerdhari Ji. With his notable efforts, he has recently realized his dream by setting up of the Sanskrit Sadan with the agenda of working for the cause of Sanskrit. Every year, around one thousand candidates sit for the above mentioned examinations.

The Hindi Pracharini Sabha, established in 1926, is also contributing in the promotion of Sanskrit in its own way. Every year, this institution conducts Hindi examinations at the level of *Praveśikā*, *Paricaya*, *Prathamā*, *Madhyamā*, and *Uttamā*, in which compulsory Sanskrit components are also examined. Since 1970, the Sanatan Dharma Mandir Parishad conducts Sanskrit examinations based on the *Bhagavadgītā* and *Rāmāyaṇa*.³¹ However, the credit of teaching Sanskrit in a formal way up to a degree level goes to the Mahatma Gandhi Institute. Since 1991,³² under the headship of Dr. P. S. Roodurmun, a Department of Sanskrit, Indian Philosophy, and Hindu Theology has been set up with the view to provide the necessary structure for the organization of activities in the field of Sanskrit, Indian Philosophy, and Hindu Theology at various levels. In July 2009, the status of School was conferred to this Department and it became the School of Indological Studies, under which now exists the Department of Sanskrit. This Department is the main facilitator in the preservation, dissemination and promotion of Sanskrit language in our country. It offers courses in Sanskrit at Beginners', Basic, Foundation, Diploma, Degree, and Postgraduate levels. It also offers Sanskrit modules in other disciplines of the School. Every year, hundreds of students follow these courses.

The D.A.V. Secondary School set up in 1965, falling under the aegis of the Arya Sabha Mauritius has taught Sanskrit since 2003, where candidates contin-

³⁰ Interview, Malti Auckle, retired Senior Lecturer, Sanskrit.

³¹ Budhu 2016.

³² Registry, School of Indological Studies, Mahatma Gandhi Institute.

ue to sit for a Sanskrit examination at the Cambridge School Certificate level. Earlier, in 1963, a Gurukul had been set up at Nouvelle Decouverte, where Acharya Bala Mookoond Dwivedi provided his services in educating 40 young candidates in Sanskrit among whom one was Dr Lalbeehary.³³ In 2007, the Arya Sabha established the D.A.V. Degree College at Pailles, where in its BA General Course, a complete Sanskrit module was implemented. This College is currently designing an M.A. program with a full module in Sanskrit.

The Prof. Basdeo Bissoondoyal Secondary School is currently offering Sanskrit at a school certificate level. Le Lycee Mauricien and the Bhujoharry College are two other secondary schools offering Sanskrit up to Grade IX level. The Chinmaya Mission, Mauritius is another NGO which has been continuously working to promote Sanskrit since its inception.

The Mauritian Government is not far behind in the promotion of Sanskrit in Mauritius. In this regard, in June 2010, the Sanskrit Speaking Union Bill was passed in the National Assembly.

To conclude, it can be said that though Indian immigrants to Mauritius had to face lot of hardships while starting a new life in a new undeveloped country, they did not lose or forget their cultural heritage. Rather, they continued to nurture what they brought as seed. Ultimately, the result is that today, more and more people in Mauritius are becoming conscious regarding the study of Sanskrit and they are also becoming aware of the benefits of knowing Sanskrit.

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