

# **ECONOMICS, CONFLICTS AND INTERCULTURALITY IN A SMALL ISLAND STATE : THE CASE OF MAURITIUS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Mauritius has often been presented to the rest of the world as a success story not only because of its good economic performance but also because of its interracial peace and harmony. However, early this year, Mauritius experienced important forms of civil unrest which paralysed the country for a whole week. What started as a class phenomenon quickly degenerated into a communal affair making interpretations and readings of the February riots even more difficult and complex. The riots have in fact stripped many Mauritians of their complacency and have emphasised the fragility of the 'rainbow nation'. The question that arises is whether interculturality exists, what shape it takes and what are the challenges that globalisation poses to interculturality in the Mauritian context.

Milton Esman, (1997:527) Professor of International studies, at Cornell University in his paper 'Public Administration, Ethnic Conflict and Economic Development' argues that: *"The copious literature on economic development demonstrates little concern for ethnic cleavages. The tendency is to treat such plural systems as India, Nigeria, Turkey and so on as integrated societies with aggregate economic growth as the accepted policy goal"*.

Mauritius too is a plural society which has for a long time focussed on aggregate economic growth as the policy goal. In the process of channelling its energies towards the consolidation of its economy, Mauritius has benefited from the emergence of some form of economic nationalism and has perhaps ignored the need to develop a strong sense of interculturality as well as a Mauritian identity. Interculturality in Mauritius limits itself to people of different ethnic backgrounds working together on the same premises and attending same schools. The development strategies adopted in the post independence period provided windows of opportunity to various sections of society. The population experienced an improvement in their standard of living and a middle class grew in the 80s. The economy became more or less of a unifying principle. With globalization however, opportunities are shrinking, winners are few and losers many. Increasing inequalisation brings about

frustration and alienation which manifest themselves in various forms as exemplified by the riots of February 1999. Since Mauritius has not been able to develop a sense of Mauritian-ness and there is only a semblance of interculturality, the island state remains fragile and vulnerable. Mauritius has to find new ways and means to ensure the growth of its economic pie, sustain its competitive edge and retain interethnic peace and harmony.

The first part of the paper explains briefly the economic strategies of the country and looks at some of the factors which have contributed to the country's successful development. It also analyses the asymmetrical distribution of entitlements and questions the implications of growing poverty in a small state like Mauritius. Smallness, the paper argues, often contributes to making inequalities more readily and easily visible and thus frustration builds up more quickly.

The second part deplores the fact that interculturality has not been given enough attention and that instead there has been a collage or a pastiche of cultures which have in many ways prevented the emergence of a Mauritian culture. Emphasis on 'unity in diversity' as part of the official policy has contributed to this collage, thus producing and reproducing the coexistence of diverse groups with very little significant interaction, understanding and appreciation of the 'Other'. This section also looks at a few examples of how diverse groups react under particular circumstances thus highlighting the emphasis that some people place on their ethnic identity and the menace it poses on social cohesion.

The third part discusses the challenges confronting the small island state in these globalised times. It argues that Mauritius may not even be able to use its smallness as a tool of economic diplomacy in this increasingly liberalised era. It also draws attention to the difficulties associated with the 'Africa Growth and Opportunity Bill' which is increasingly regarded as a source of great hope for the country.

The paper concludes that unless Mauritius addresses the inherent inequity of the system, promote a culture of sustainable human rights and ensures that 'otherness' takes a new significance, interculturality will only remain a myth and development itself will be hampered. The paper also suggests that education and the schooling system has an important role to play in promoting interculturality but so far it has not been able to do so.

## **SUCCESSFUL DEVELOPMENT**

At independence in 1968, Mauritius had to grapple with a rapidly expanding population, huge balance of payments deficit, soaring prices, massive unemployment and a stagnating monocrop economy.

In less than a decade however, Mauritius diversified its economic structures, created an export processing zone, developed a strong tourist industry and more recently a financial and offshore centre. Parallel to these developments, Mauritius consolidated its welfare state. Mauritius provides free health, free education and old age pensions to all its citizens.

Mauritius has few natural resources, no home grown technology, no defence forces, little capital and imports most of its food. In addition to these, Mauritius also experiences various intrinsic problems of small countries such as proneness to natural disasters, limited domestic markets, dependence on foreign capital, and disproportionate expenditure on administration (Bray, 1992; Briguglio, 1998). Mauritius has also been classified as highly vulnerable by the Commonwealth Secretariat, yet Mauritius has achieved high growth rates in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Mauritius has developed so fast and so well that it became known as the 'tiger' of the Indian Ocean. This image impacted on people's psyche leading to the emergence of some form of economic nationalism. The economy has been for a long time the rallying factor but the question that arises now is whether the economy will continue to unite or will it rather divide in this era of jobless growth.

Mauritius's success story can be attributed to various factors. The country's ability to control its rapidly expanding population is an important one. Today Mauritius has a population of approximately 1.2 million. Annual population growth fell from 4.7% in 1963 to 1.2% in 1993, which Royle (1995:37) regards 'as one of the steepest fertility declines ever recorded.' This successful population control, perhaps largely due to the smallness of the place, has enabled Mauritius avoid a Malthusian nightmare that people such as Meade (1968), Titmuss and Abel Smith (1961) and Naipaul (1972) were so worried about.

Another factor which has perhaps contributed to Mauritius's stability and success story is its electoral system. The latter has been analysed by various people. Opinions and views remain very divided. Whilst the World Development Report (1997:113) writes: "*The designers of the electoral system, anxious to avoid creating institutions that might exacerbate the country's divisions, structured the system to force the main parties to seek support from all communities. Moreover, Mauritius governments have generally chosen broad based growth and distributive policies over ethnic preferences. Formal preference in employment and education has never been used. And all governments since independence have had to form multiethnic coalitions in order to assume and maintain power. Growth with redistribution has tended to blunt the appeal of communal politics.*"

And Mukonoweshuro (1991) explains that the politicians *“have woven a political spoils system which has ensured that each ethnic group has an established stake in the system, thus ensuring its legitimacy by all the ethno religious communities on the island.”*

Whilst Mukonoweshuro (1991) and the International Herald Tribune (1993) highlight the beneficial aspects of the Best Loser system, Mathur (1991: 69) argues: *“...We are convinced that the best loser system and the present electoral delimitations promote and encourage communalism and are therefore, detrimental to nation building.”*

Mathur (1991), Blood (1957) and Nave (1998) regard it as a major perpetrator of communalism and as having the potential to divide. Although some people generally argue that the best loser system breeds communalism, splits Mauritian society and hampers the development of a Mauritian nation, others think it helps to tame communalism and is a contributory factor to the political stability ‘à la mauricienne’ and a democratic system- a rather rare quality in the neighbouring African continent and other parts of the Third world. The best loser system may well be contributing to the maintenance of democracy in Mauritius but it is certainly not contributing to making Mauritius a united nation. Blood (1957: 359), after his period of governorship in Mauritius from 1949 to 1953, though recognising the need for special arrangements to ensure the representation of all communities, writes: *“Heaven forbid that it should become permanent: that would be a confession of failure, an acknowledgement of a racially divided state which cannot find a national unifying principle.”*

The national unifying principles have been the economy and the Creole language. But now that the economy begins to experience a painful downturn and different groups compete for the scarce resources, conflicts are bound to rise. Creole, although spoken by one and all, is not the official language, nor the medium of instruction in schools. It is the language of everyday interaction but does not have an official status.

Another factor, which has perhaps contributed to Mauritius’s success story, is the type of SAPS (Structural Adjustment Programmes) and the style in which they were implemented. While the overall stance of SAPS is to restructure the economy through the reduction in the share of the public sector, the stimulation of entrepreneurship and export orientation, the pursuit of price liberalisation and the implementation of a user pay policy with regard to public utility, the Mauritian state has tried to implement a policy of adjustment with a human face. It combined growth with equity through mainly employment creation, cushioning the impact of adjustment measures on particular groups and giving incentives to small businesses.

Bheenick (1991:5) argued that the Government was committed to reform but maintained ‘an intensive policy dialogue’ with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which meant that the structural adjustment loan was bank supported rather than

bank dictated. The Government takes great pride in the fact that Mauritius resisted the IMF's request to abolish free education and subsidies on food. This decision has certainly enabled many people to benefit from education. The policies of economic diversification adopted in the post independence period and SAPS with a human face have contributed to making Mauritius a middle income country.

This does not mean that Mauritius did not experience any pains with SAPs. Gulhati and Nalhari (1990:58) write: *"The macro economic stabilisation, mainly through curtailment of aggregate demand, involved quite a painful adjustment, consisting of rising unemployment, declining real wages and disciplined austerity. The government persevered with reforms even though it meant a considerable loss in economic growth and a perceptible setback in the welfare of low income groups. Very little was done to 'sweeten the pill' for underprivileged social groups."*

Although mention is made of the underprivileged groups, no one knows exactly who they are and whether their children have over the past two decades of successful development been able to climb the social ladder. Statistics are not collected along ethnic lines in Mauritius yet there seems to be clear indication that what Eriksen (1991) calls the "Ti kreol" are disproportionately represented amongst the poorest stratum of Mauritian society. Creoles, i.e people of African descent are not a homogeneous group in Mauritius but there is increasing recognition that some sections of this group are the most marginalised. When members of disadvantaged communities take stock of their plight and begin to realise that the distribution of entitlements is too asymmetrical, tensions begin to rise and interculturality takes new dimensions.

## **SOCIAL COHESION, POVERTY AND CONFLICTS**

Mauritius has often been praised for an enduring record of democracy and harmonious interracial relationships. The Government's vision 2020 report states: *"Some people marvel that we have achieved so much economic success despite the burden of our welfare state. It can well be argued that in reality it was the other way round: we achieved economic success partly because of the strength of our welfare system. For it is free education, social security and health and welfare services which have given the high education levels, high health standards and above all the exceptional social cohesion which have underpinned our past economic development."*

Despite the positive picture of Mauritius presented above there is concern over emerging social challenges facing the country. Vision 2020 mentions an array of societal breakdowns e.g. drug addiction and drug trafficking, alcoholism, sexual assaults of females,

muggings and attacks on the aged, burglaries, prostitution, domestic violence, divorce, suicides, child battering and sexual abuse. The Social Fabric Study phase two (1999) in fact confirms Vision 2020's argument that many of these problems are associated with poverty and deprivation. If poverty hits particular groups within a small multiethnic society, the country runs the risk of having to face diverse forms of conflicts and interculturality becomes threatened. Interculturality, this paper argues, can only be real and genuine if social justice prevails, if every citizen is given an equal chance and he or she perceives that this is the case.

In small states with different groups embodying religious, ethnic and linguistic differences there is greater need to create higher levels of cultural convergences. The avoidance of intergroup tensions by creating convergences through 'interfacing with neighbouring cultures' is not only possible but more necessary in small states.

Writing about the Creole islands in the Indian Ocean, Doumenge (1977: 87) states: *"The creole islands subject to French or British cultural influence, however, particularly if they have changed hands a number of times in the course of conflicts between their metropolitan overlords, exhibit every degree of a cultural development rendered all the more complex by the fact that it has involved confrontations between many ethnic groups (European, African, Asian) each of which has contributed to a structure generally still too heterogenous to be professionally stabilised."*

What Doumenge implies by professional stabilisation is not very clear but what is certain at least in Mauritius is that the country has in spite of its diverse populations and cultures, experienced a period of stability. The economic development of the country has contributed to that and it is the intellectually trained elite which engineered the economic development. Bunwaree (1994: 28) writes: *"Unlike their counterparts in more socially and politically troubled less developed countries, Mauritius's intellectually trained elite has been able to take a long range approach to macro economic policy making and implementation."*

*Whether the intellectually trained elite (the bureaucracy and the politicians) in Mauritius will be able to continue engage in relevant policy making in this increasingly globalised era and maintain social cohesion is a question that surfaces.*

Conflicts have raged in Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia in the 1990s, often involving the entire international community in costly relief operations and peacekeeping missions, frequently under hostile conditions. These conflicts- mostly civil wars- have been extraordinarily brutal, with most victims being children, women and the elderly. Peace is becoming increasingly elusive. A recent report sponsored by Future harvest and generated by the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo examines conflicts around the world

and finds that most of today's wars are fuelled by poverty, not by ideology. (The International Herald Tribune, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1999).

*The violence of February 1999 can perhaps be attributed to the growing poverty and 'inequalisation', to borrow a term from Dahrendorf (1995:13). The gap between the haves and have nots is increasing in Mauritius. The Malaise Creole - a term that has been coined in recent years to explain the deplorable plight of some sections of the Creole community is regarded as a major cause of the social explosion by some. Tensions flared during a public meeting organised by the Mouvement Republicain, a small political party which was asking for the depenalisation of gandia. Police had subsequently arrested some participants for smoking banned substances. Among those detained was Kaya, one of the country's leading Creole seggae singers. His arrest and death in police custody triggered a series of protest marches in major forms, amid allegations that he had been beaten to death by police officers.*

*The demonstrations of February 1999 rapidly escalated out of control and the country was brought to a standstill for almost a week. Protesters vandalised public and private property in various parts of the island. Various symbols of capitalism and wealth were targeted as well as symbols representing the state such as police stations, traffic lights and government owned buses and other vehicles such as ambulances. Looting of shops and stores took place and a few peoples' houses were burnt.*

*Although the unrest of February 1999 degenerated into some form of communal attacks between the creole community on the one side and the Muslims and the Hindus on the other, some people's interpretations and readings of the riots are that they are much more an indication of the frustration of the working class and that Kaya's death was simply a detonator.*

*Writing about the Malaise Creole, Piat (1993:2) argued: "if the suffering involved in the Malaise Creole is not addressed, there might come a day when it will explode into violence."*

*The violence of February 1999 is certainly an example of that explosion. The Malaise Creole in Mauritius needs to be studied and addressed quickly, otherwise class and or ethnic tensions may exacerbate. Schiff (1998:352) writes: "Efficiency may depend on the distribution of income because a more unequal distribution increases friction among social groups, reduces their willingness to cooperate and may result in political instability. This is particularly true of countries characterised by ethnic diversity where each ethnic group is endowed with different factors of production."*

*The Creoles in Mauritius are perhaps the ones endowed with the least resources and in these globalised times opportunities are getting scarcer.*

In a period of growing inequalisation and wealth getting concentrated in the hands of a few, interculturality is under great strain. Creole groups are emerging and increasingly

holding discourses around the idea that they are excluded from the system. There is resentment over the fact that they are heavily underrepresented in the public sector and that opportunities are not the same for everyone in a society which calls itself democratic. During the course of history, Creole groups have often argued that there is nothing being done for them. In recent years, the concept Malaise Creole has surfaced up. Some people argue that the creole group is responsible for its own plight, that they do not have a culture of savings and that they have developed a culture of dependency. Many cultural stereotypes are attached to them. There is also the argument that they fled from the sugar camps and did not want to work the land but there is enough historical evidence now that they were made to leave the camps. Land which is a major asset was never appropriated by them. On the other hand as a consequence of the grand morcellement, the Indians bought small plots of land. The possession of land by this group became an important means to sustain their livelihoods and also contributed to the mobility of the group. The landless poor are perhaps disproportionately present in the creole group. Nowadays, there is increasing talk of an "Equal Opportunity Act" in Mauritius but whether the mere passing of such an act will bring redress is a question that comes to mind. This echoes Esman's (1997: 528) ideas: *"Even when laws, policies and programs appear in a formal sense to be objective and impartial, they may be skewed in implementation by public administration to favour one set of ethnic claimants over others. This ethnic skewing can be applied to matters of substantial value, including government contracts, access to land, credit, capital, business licenses and foreign exchange, and to a variety of public services such as higher education, municipal amenities, housing, water supply and recreational facilities."*

The 'Malaise Creole' that has so often been talked about in Mauritius in recent years in fact refers to the non possession of many of these resources by the creole community and the ensuing inequality. The passing of such laws such as the ones mentioned above only will only reinforce the idea that everybody is given an equal chance but the playing field will remain very unlevelled.

The United Nations Human Development Report (1999) ranks Mauritius 59<sup>th</sup> on the record of Human Development Index. However, pockets of poverty continue to persist in Mauritius. This is being increasingly recognised by government. The HDI is just an average which hides regional, gender and ethnic disparities. Such disparities if unaddressed can take an added significance in a small interethnic state like Mauritius, whose education/training system fails to develop a sense of Mauritian-ness and emphasises competitive rather than cooperative learning. The education system allows a large section of the country's human capital to go waste at the age of 10+ as a consequence of a very fierce competitive selection examination, known as the Certificate of Primary Examination (CPE). Moreover, education in Mauritius, contrary to many other parts of the world fails to develop



cohesiveness and a truly multicultural society. The rainbow nation that Mauritius speaks of so often is simply a collage of diverse people who have been for a long time united by a sense of economic nationalism

Not only does the educational system fail to develop a strong Mauritian identity but it contributes to the exclusion of many. Those who are excluded are also often excluded from the labour market which increasingly demands sophisticated skills possessed by the privileged few only.

*The Gini coefficient (a statistic measuring the degree of inequality in the distribution of income) has started deteriorating in Mauritius. It has moved from 0.379 in 1992 to 0.387 in 1997. Wealth remains heavily concentrated in the hands of a few.*

*This asymmetry of entitlements may have serious implications for a small multiethnic society when unemployment is on the rise and some groups increasingly perceive themselves as the most marginalised.*

*Although efforts are being made to address poverty in Mauritius, there is no coherent holistic policy which has been developed. A number of programmes have been introduced such as the Marshall Plan, the Trust Fund for the social integration of vulnerable groups and a poverty alleviation programme. But there is no official poverty line in Mauritius although there is increasing recognition of the existence of pockets of poverty in the different regions of the country. Devising programmes such as these are laudable and indicate Government's willingness to address the problems of the marginalised and the vulnerable. But poverty is multifaceted and very complex. Moving towards a more just society in a multiethnic setting such as Mauritius requires a deeper understanding of the cultural, structural and individual factors that may be causing people to live in poverty. Poverty and exclusion is often linked to a lack of good quality and relevant education. Smallness of the economy and capacity of the labour market to generate employment are variables that should not be ignored in all planning exercises.*

## **THE LABOUR MARKET AND AN ETHNICISED DIVISION OF LABOUR**

The labour market, a major provider of livelihoods is often regarded as segmented in Mauritius. There is some sort of a cultural division of labour correlated with ethnic membership. The public sector is said to be dominated by the Hindu group whilst the private sector is mostly filled by Whites, Mulattoes and very few Creoles. The Franco Mauritians, commonly known as the sugar barons (grand Blancs) remain the country's wealthiest group and have invested in the manufacturing sector and tourism. They are followed by the Chinese dominating this sector, though there are wealthy Muslim textile and grain traders. At

the bottom of the socio-economic scale are the Hindu plantation workers, Muslims working in petty jobs within the informal sector and Black Creole factory workers, dockers and fishermen.

In addition to its being ethnicised, the Mauritian labour market is small and in this information age, it may thin down even further. Its limited capacity to generate employment may cause friction amongst the various groups. Various minority groups e.g. Creoles and Muslims already express their resentment at the fact that they are underrepresented in certain sectors e.g the police and the public sector.

## **SMALLNESS AND ETHNIC REVIVALISM**

Smallness as a variable is also important in analysing social cohesion. Bray (1992:26) writes: *“The small size of the social field, together with ingrained awareness of ecological and social fragility, fosters what another sociologist calls ‘managed intimacy’. Small state inhabitants learn to get along, like it or not, with people they will know in many contexts over their whole lives. To enable the social mechanism to function without undue stress, they minimise open conflicts. They become expert at muting hostility, deferring their own views, and avoiding dispute in the interests of stability and compromise. In large societies it is easy to take issue with antagonists you need seldom or never meet again, but to differ with someone in a small society in which you share a long mutual history and expect to go on being involved in countless ways is another matter.”*

It may well be that Mauritians have for a while been deferring their views etc but more recently different groups have made themselves more vocal. A complex form of ethnic revivalism makes itself felt in the country. Ethnic revivalism in fact highlights the fragility of the official policy of ‘unity in diversity’. Major religious festivals such as EID ul Fitr, Divali, Christmas and Chinese spring festival have been declared national and public holidays are granted for such occasion. Some Creole groups believe that the 1<sup>st</sup> of February should be declared a public holiday since abolition of slavery is commemorated on that day. This request for a holiday has not been granted and may be a major source of resentment by certain groups. This may cause other forms of division and be a real threat to interculturality. The country has already witnessed other complex cleavages. The examples that follow highlight these cleavages.

## **ORIENTAL LANGUAGES, BANK NOTE ISSUE, SPORTS AND FOOTBALL**

Mauritius has for a long time tried to encourage the promotion of the ancestral languages. In 1986, the government went as far as deciding to include these languages for certification purposes at CPE. In 1993, a select committee of Parliament recommended that the oriental languages should be considered for purposes of ranking at the end of the primary school cycle. This led to a lot of controversy since it was felt that some children of other communal groups not studying these languages would not be getting an equal chance.

*Oriental languages for purposes of ranking has in fact become a major issue in the general elections, which took place in December 1995. Ex Prime Minister Jugnauth's government made this an important issue in the elections hoping that the vast majority of Mauritians of Indian descent would support this cause. It is rather comforting to find that the issue was not of relevance to the vast majority of people including the Hindu majority group.*

*The question of oriental languages may not have been an important decisive factor in the elections of 1995 but nevertheless remains an issue which poses some threat to interculturality in Mauritius.*

One does not really know to what extent it will be important since it is closely linked to the question of ranking at CPE and efforts are being made to abolish ranking itself.

Another example of the fragility of Mauritian social cohesion are the events surrounding the new bank note issue in October 1998. Mauritians of Tamil ancestry were furious about the positions of the Tamil and Hindi script being reversed on the newly released bank notes. The amount of resentment raised by the Tamil community led to the forced resignation of the Governor of the Central Bank and the removal of these bank notes from circulation. The issue of these bank notes had cost some Rs 58 million to the country but had to be removed from circulation since it was feared that this issue may cause more complex problems which might become hard to handle.

Sports and football in Mauritius have often been regarded as a terrain of potential ethnic tensions. Although the government has made various efforts to de-ethnicise sports, particularly football, outbursts of violence triggered by rivalries between supporters of different ethnic teams still exist. The policy of democratising and holding regional competitions at all levels has reduced the ethnic dimension of sports but sometimes the ethnic consciousness predominates as exemplified by the events associated with "Zamalek" an Egyptian team playing in Mauritius some time back. Riots broke out when a group of Muslim Mauritians demonstrated their support vociferously to the Egyptian team against the national team.

Although the above examples are not directly linked to the economy, they highlight the fact that each group wants to claim a certain ethnic identity. As Mauritius moves into more uncertain times, ethnic revivalism of this sort can be a real threat to interculturality.

## **A NATION DIVIDED AND A POOR SENSE OF MAURITIAN-NESS**

Mauritius was divided as it moved to independence; there was no national unity in the move. The minorities under the fear of the “hindu peril” voted against independence. The political campaign leading to the August 1967 general elections and the independence issue, had been so dominated by the ethnic question that racial riots followed in early 1968 in different regions of the island, mainly in Port Louis and its suburbs. Instead, tensions, fears and a widespread reluctance towards independence made themselves felt. 44% of the population voted against independence. In order to reduce tensions and dampen fears of the different communal parties, the British brought forward a plan to establish a new electoral commission to deal with issues of representation. The Best Loser System which was discussed before was introduced. Nowadays, there is increasing talk of proportional representation.

Mauritius is not a society with universalistic values where the individual is first and foremost a patriotic citizen. Royle (1995) notes that *“There is no violence between these groups, but neither is there much mixing nor intermarriages.”*

An overarching sense of national identity is missing. We cannot but agree with Bowman (1991) who argues that Mauritius is a place “Where historically a high degree of saliency has been put on ethnic identity”. Speaking about the obstacles to the development of a Mauritian nationalism, Bowman (1991:64) writes: *“The idea of escape or return to a homeland is deeply rooted in historical experience and has hindered the development of a Mauritian nationalism.”*

Although Bowman’s reference to the return to a homeland is not translated in practical terms, it is very telling in the sense that many Mauritians’ ‘imagined community’ to borrow a term from Anderson (1983) tends to lie elsewhere. Dinan (1985) too remarks that being immigrants, Mauritians have cultivated to a high degree the feeling of belonging somewhere else. The soul of a nation expresses itself by language, beliefs, values, customs art and craft, music, landscapes, flora and fauna and literature but in the case of Mauritius most of this was brought from abroad except for the geography and ecology of the island. Mauritians of diverse origin also try to retain their mother tongues. Religion appears to be more significant than language in maintaining and reinforcing ethnic identity in Mauritius. Mauritius, home to over a million inhabitants is still after more than 30 years of independence a place

where one is according to Lehembre (1984 : 223) *“Indien ou catholique, hindou ou musulman, franco mauricien ou creole, ou chinois ou tamoul. Rarement a Maurice on se sent Mauricien.”*

Oommen (1997) defines the nation as a: *“territorial entity to which the people have an emotional attachment and in which they have invented a moral meaning: it is a homeland-ancestral or adopted. It is the fusion of territory and language which makes a nation: a nation is a community in communication in its homeland.”*

A community in communication is an interesting concept but the question that we need to pose in the interpretation of the Mauritian situation is whether there is a Mauritian community and if not whether the diverse communities are in communication - are we moving toward the intercultural?

One would have thought that the Mauritian schooling system could contribute towards strengthening social cohesion and interculturality by inculcating people with a certain degree of nationalism/nation hood as well as understanding and appreciation of the other, but as Bissoondoyal notes, the system does not have much to offer on this score. Bissoondoyal (1991:2) argues: *“No student who goes through the system has a satisfactory notion of the country, its geography and history, the making of a society and its problems, the development process.”*

The education system therefore is producing alienated human beings- Mauritians who are foreigners within their own borders.

Mauritius has for a long time placed a lot of emphasis on the idea of ‘unity in diversity.’ Such a policy has contributed to a collage or patchwork of cultures where each citizen only knows only very little about the ‘other’. Schooling has not contributed to making ‘otherness’ take a new shape and value in post-colonial Mauritius.

## **GLOBALIZATION, THE ECONOMY AND THE UNIFYING PRINCIPLE**

The question that this section seeks to address is whether a small, isolated, dependent, resource poor economy which is caught in the throes of globalization will be able to survive and continue to keep its people united.

Mauritius has in recent years started facing a painful downturn. The Economist of 28th Feb (1998:47) devotes a section to Mauritius and entitles it ‘Miracle in Trouble’. The Economist writes : *“...Surprises don’t go well with the Mauritian private sector and the crisis in South East Asia came as a particularly nasty one. In the past decade Asian style policies in Mauritius produced an export led boom which transformed this previously sugar*

*dependent economy into a mini miracle, an African tiger cub. Now Mauritian textile prices are being undercut by cheaper Asian garments.”*

Cheaper Asian garments and the emergence of cheap labour countries such as Madagascar, Sri Lanka and Vietnam are certainly important difficulties for Mauritius, but the country has to face other significant challenges in the post General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) era. The globalization and liberalisation of trade under the aegis of WTO will adversely affect many of the semi-protectionist advantages enjoyed by Mauritius under the outgoing GATT regime. There are doubts as to whether the LOME convention will be renewed and if it does get renewed, there are fears that the terms of the renewal will not be as favourable as they used to be to the developing countries. Politicians and policy makers develop a wide array of negotiating skills but there is no certainty that the painful downturn that Mauritius is experiencing can be reversed. Industries are relocating and moving to cheaper countries. Unemployment is on the rise, and the currency is depreciating rapidly. The introduction of VAT (Value Added Tax) in 1998 and the inflationary trends make it difficult for the poor to sustain their livelihoods.

Another major challenge is the dismantling of the Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA). The MFA which has enabled Mauritian firms to receive higher prices for its clothing exports to the European Union and the US runs out in 2005. The protected markets enjoyed so far will disappear. Mauritian textiles and clothing will then be subject to the same rules of the ruthless market. The emergence of regional blocks such as NAFTA, ASEAN, the European Union has implications for Mauritius. Mauritius may find it very difficult to access any one of them.

The initial spurt of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows that fuelled the boom is tapering off. Lack of investment in the country impact on employment creation possibilities. The Labour Force survey (1995) mentions an unemployment level of 10% but there is no consensus on the actual level of unemployment in the country.

What is certain however is that more people are losing their jobs and new entrants on the labour market experience a lot of difficulty before obtaining a job. The policy of the government is to shift to an information based economy. This implies more use of mental than physical powers and it also implies a thinning down of the labour market.

Another major challenge confronting Mauritius is the lack of skilled and qualified human power. Mauritius needs to upgrade its human resource base as well as minimise waste of its human capital. The International Herald Tribune of 20<sup>th</sup> Sept 1993 in a special report on Mauritius says that the ‘economy needs to retool to ward off stagnation’. In that same article, the Herald Tribune quoting the World Bank says: *“Mauritius will need to foster increased labour productivity by improving technology and reallocating labour to higher*

*productivity sectors. This will require an upgrading of skills and thus a greater emphasis on education and manpower training.'*

The question of upgrading its human resource base has also been taken up by Wignaraja and Lall (1998:75) but Mauritius has still not been able to address the inefficiencies of its education/training system. Many documents and policy papers have been produced. There was a Master Plan of Education in 1991 and an Action Plan in 1996 but none of them have been implemented. One of the major concerns of both plans is to reduce the inefficiencies and to provide a compulsory nine year schooling system but this is still at the level of rhetoric.

For quite some time, many countries including Mauritius have used their 'smallness' as a tool of economic diplomacy. Baldacchino (1993:38) explains how small states use the 'power of being powerless' and the 'importance of being unimportant' to negotiate in their interests. But in this increasingly liberalised and globalised era, one is not so sure whether such economic diplomacy will continue to hold good.

Trapped in 'dependent development' and having to confront the exigencies of the global economy, Mauritius has to juggle with various policies to try and maintain its competitive edge as well as its social cohesion. Smallness poses various dilemmas to Mauritius as it attempts to minimise waste along the educational continuum and upgrade its human resource base. Expanded schooling opportunities and extended years of schooling raises aspirations and expectations which are often unmet since a small country's capacity to generate employment is even more limited than bigger countries.

The shrinking labour market and the parallel revolution of rising expectations exacerbate the potential for conflict in small pluriethnic states. The Commonwealth Advisory group (1997:133) argues: "*Community and political security are particularly important for small states, given that dispute and discord can quickly spread throughout society and become magnified into major challenges to social and political order.*"

As Mauritius's economic difficulties abound and windows of opportunity become scarcer, it becomes imperative for Mauritius to establish a new educational order, one which equalises opportunities in the true sense, focussed on outcomes and not merely access. Whilst retaining the need to make education/training more relevant to the needs of the economy, the Mauritian education system should also beef up its social and cultural responsibilities, instill such values in citizens so that 'otherness' takes a new significance, becomes a factor that unite rather than divide.

As the economy starts experiencing various difficulties, some opinion leaders and policy makers try to convince people that the Africa Growth and Opportunity Bill brings hope to Mauritius but Mauritians have to be flexible, productive and competitive. Flexibility,

productivity and competitiveness are the order of the day but what Mauritian leaders fail to emphasise are the various conditionalities imposed by the Africa Growth and Opportunity Bill (AGOB).

Labour unions in Mauritius have divergent views about the bill. Whilst some of them support the government and Mauritius Export Processing Zones Association (MEPZA)'s initiative of lobbying for the passage of the bill, others led by AWC- All Workers Conference argue that the bill come with too many conditionalities which can have adverse effects on people. The AWC opposes the strong private sector orientation of the bill and have joined the coalition of anti free trade NGOs, American Unions and US garments' manufacturers who oppose it (Le Mauricien. 11 February, 1999). More recently, WILDAF (Women in Law and Development in Africa) at their second general assembly held in Accra in July 1999 drew attention to the various implications that the Africa Bill may have on people's livelihoods and argued that with the Africa Bill, many African countries will have to abide by the exigencies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. WILDAF also argued that there should be a strong campaign asking for the removal of the conditionalities imposed by the Africa Bill (Le Mauricien, 14 August 1999).

Since our EPZ (Export Processing Zone) is heavily concentrated in textiles and conditionalities are most severe on textiles, capitalists are having to find ways and means to retain productivity and competitiveness. The two methods that they mostly adopt is either to relocate or to import foreign labour. The impact of foreign labour on local employment has not been studied but the presence of foreign workers especially if it goes on magnifying, will certainly pose a new challenge to interculturality in a small place like Mauritius.

## **CONCLUSION**

*Certain growth development models with a trickle down approach frequently centre only some and marginalises many. The marginalised often remain jobless, voiceless, rootless and futureless. If this category is disproportionately present in minority communities or there is the perception that this is the case, interculturality and peace are threatened. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze in their book 'Economic Development and Social Opportunity', quote Dryden as saying: "Beware the fury of the patient man." Sen and Dreze seem to argue that when people's patience wear out, they can explode in fury. Symptoms of such fury has perhaps made itself felt in February 1999 in Mauritius. When the marginalised and excluded cannot be patient anymore, Mauritius, the dead volcano runs the risk of becoming alive again.*



*Mauritius has scope to promote interculturality but to do this it requires a new educational order - one which promotes and develops a culture of sustainable human rights. The education system should also work towards ensuring that 'otherness' takes a new significance. The Mauritian educational system is intercultural but only in the sense that it accepts people from diverse backgrounds on the same premises – it gives them a chance to rub shoulders but it has a long way to go in teacher training, devising new curricula and syllabi and most important of all in bridging the gap between intent and reality in order to make interculturality become real.*

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