



# Case Studies of Science Diplomacy in Indo-Mauritian Collaboration



**Ruvina Seebun\***

## Introduction

Mauritius, officially the Republic of Mauritius, is an island nation in the Indian Ocean about 2,000 kilometres off the southeast coast of the African continent (Wikipedia, 2020). Mauritius has an upper middle income economy which is ranked 13<sup>th</sup> worldwide out of 190 economies in terms of ease of doing business in the World Bank's 2019 Ease of Doing Business Index (World Bank, 2019). The country has built its success on a free market economy. According to the 2019 Economic Freedom of the World report, Mauritius is ranked as having the 9<sup>th</sup> most free economy in the world (Fraser Institute, 2019).

Mauritius has very strong and friendly relations with India for both historical and commercial reasons and it is worthy to note that the connection between the two states dates back to 1730. Diplomatic relations between India and Mauritius were established in 1948, well before Mauritius was declared Independent in 1968. Mauritius maintained contacts with India through successive Dutch, French and British occupation. Around half a million of Indian indentured labourers were brought into Mauritius between 1834 and early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and out of them about two thirds settled permanently in Mauritius (High Commission of India, 2018). At present, around seventy percent of the Mauritian population is of Indian origin.

Starting from the time of the accession of Mauritius to the status of an independent nation to the present day, the contours of the special relationship between the two sovereign states have been defined by the changing socio-economic and political developments in the two countries as well as in the global politico-diplomatic arena. This is not to say that there have been any significant changes every time an alternative political regime has been elected to power in the two democracies. Indeed, it is quite remarkable how changes in governments in India have had very

---

\* *Second Secretary, Ministry Of Foreign Affairs Regional Integration And International Trade.*

little impact on the relationship between the two countries.

While the two countries have maintained their special relationship through thick and thin, it is the content of this relationship which has really been conditioned by the evolving nature of their internal socio-political progress as well as the fundamental and epoch-marking changes in the global environment.

The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed huge evolution from the bipolar world of the Cold War era and the unleashing of globalization and its neo-liberal agenda which has completely transformed the global geo-political setting. These have necessarily impacted on the way the two nations have re-defined their respective roles in the global economy.

While Mauritius as a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) has forcibly agreed to adapt to the new rules of the game, India has to a large extent chosen to integrate further into the new global configuration, often on its own terms and at its own pace. It is true that liberalization and opening up of the economy in the early 1990s under the impulse of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh was undertaken under excruciating conditions when the foreign exchange reserves of the country had reached unacceptably low levels.

This first “economic shock therapy” though has proven to be hugely positive as it unlocked the entrepreneurship drive and allowed the country to maximize on its comparative advantage – an army of young literate engineers and computer geeks contributed to the first wave of the Information and Communications Technology revolution. This in turn provided an open platform for international business networking and communication which served as a platform for the economic take-off of India and its integration into the global economy (Servansingh, 2017). Thus, in a span of only about two decades India had moved from the status of a developing nation into a world player, even if it remains a fast emerging country with tremendous challenges especially with regard to the distribution of wealth and the eradication of poverty.

During that same lapse of time and after years

of living in its economic cocoon of protection and preferential trade agreements, Mauritius also had to wake up to confront the test of a more competitive and challenging global economic landscape. The prevailing social and economic nature of the collaborations between the two countries, which had been perfected into an art form by both international trade negotiators and the local capitalist class, has recently evolved into a more scientific and technical nature. The focus of this paper is to give an insight of the scientific and industrial nature of the diplomatic relations and collaborations between Mauritius and India.

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

India and Mauritius have been celebrating a very close collaboration since many years. India having a strong science and technology expertise has been helping Mauritius in areas as diverse as information and communication technologies, biotechnology, environment, hydrography, legal meteorology, telemetry, agriculture and ocean economy amongst others. As far as Tertiary Education is concerned, India is one of the most preferred destinations every year for Mauritian students for higher studies (undergraduate and postgraduate); around 100 ICCR scholarships are extended annually to Mauritian students for higher education in India and about two hundred Mauritian students enroll themselves in Indian Universities every year on a self-financing basis.

Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) has been India’s flagship capacity building programme since its inception in 1964 and has acquired a strong brand name in India’s development partnership with Mauritius which is one of the largest beneficiary countries of the ITEC programme. Mauritian nationals have taken advantage of a large number of scholarships offered by India on civilian and defence related training courses at Indian institutions.

## Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre

The Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre (RGSC) has been set up with the objective of kindling scientific curiosity among young Mauritians, through innovative and interactive exhibits, displays and models;

the organisation of activities and programmes, scientific lectures, seminars and fairs, and other outreach efforts. In this way, the Centre is meant to supplement school education in a non-formal way, and thus popularise scientific temper among the youth and the masses. In brief, the strategy of the Centre consists of the following:

- Develop new exhibits on emerging areas in Science and Technology.
- Encourage students to undertake science projects that will enhance their creativity, reasoning ability and skills.
- Organize lectures, seminars and workshops for various target groups.
- Develop interactive educational programmes in Science and Technology.
- Acquire and disseminate latest information in Science and Technology.
- Create awareness on impact of Science and Technology in society.
- Collaborate with other institutions for the promotion of Science and Technology.

A proposal for setting up a science centre in Mauritius for the above purposes was first proposed in 1992. The Government of India readily agreed to provide assistance for the project and identified the National Council of Science Museums (NCSM), Kolkata, as the nodal agency in India for rendering such assistance to Mauritius, in the form of technical expertise, training of local staff in India, supply of exhibits and equipment and their installation.

After the completion of the Centre, the Prime Minister of Mauritius extended a personal invitation to Smt. Sonia Gandhi to visit Mauritius and inaugurate the facility. The Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre was inaugurated by Smt. Sonia Gandhi on November 30, 2004 whereby she also unveiled a bust of late Shri Rajiv Gandhi, installed at the entrance of the building (High Commission of India, 2019).

Visitors to the RGSC can benefit from enlightening displays covering diverse subjects, such as the geological origin of Mauritius, Resources and Demography of Mauritius, an introduction to the world of modern Science & Technology, and an area

reserved for hands-on science called “Fun Science”. Apart from these permanent exhibition areas inside the science centre, the sprawling garden outside hosts a “Science Park”. Young visitors have access to about forty exhibits in the Science Park to explore concepts of science through ‘play based activities’.

The RGSC contains five permanent galleries of interactive exhibits and one temporary exhibition gallery. In addition, the Children Activity Corner, Adult Activity Area and conference room are meant to host activities like Science Demonstration Lectures, Vacation Hobby Camps, Sky Observation, Science Quiz, Science Seminars, Science Rally, etc. Other facilities available for the public in the RGSC include a cafeteria, a souvenir shop, a library, a car park and a state-of-the-art auditorium.

## Mauritius Metro Express Project

Mauritius Metro Express is a 26 km light rail transit system being developed in Mauritius. Estimated to cost MUR18.8 billion (USD 565 million), the project was officially launched in March 2017 and is being undertaken by Metro Express Limited, a wholly owned company of the Government of Mauritius. It marks a major milestone in the country’s endeavour to modernise its public transport system and propel the country towards a safer, smarter and sustainable Mauritius.

The Metro Express will be a harbinger of the new way of socio-economic transformation along with other major infrastructure projects that will upgrade the country to a high income economy. The project will bestow the country with the most modern and efficient alternative mode of transport that will enrich the transport landscape.

The project is being developed with the support of a USD 353 million grant awarded by the Government of India to Mauritius in March 2017. The grant was awarded as a special economic package for assisting five high-priority projects, which include the Metro Express project, new Supreme Court building, e-tablets for primary school children, social housing units and a new ENT hospital.

The Indian Government has granted MUR 9.9 billion (USD 275 million) for the Metro Express project as part of the grant, while the remaining

is being financed by the State Bank of Mauritius Infrastructure Development through a line of credit. An advance of MUR 1.8 billion (USD 52.95 million) was transferred to the Government of Mauritius in November 2016, followed by a MUR 900 million (USD 27.5 million) cheque issued in September 2017.

The light rail project is being undertaken to decrease traffic congestion in Mauritius, which is costing the nation around MUR 4 billion (USD 119.6 million) a year. The project design includes the creation of a multimodal urban transit solution, connecting three major bus interchanges to give commuters to access bus services. A future north-south expansion of the metro express is planned, which will create a direct connection to the airport (Railway Technology, 2019).

A Joint Project Monitoring Committee, under the chairmanship of the Minister of Public Infrastructure and Land Transport and the High Commissioner of India to Mauritius, was created to oversee the light rail project.

The Metro Express project includes the construction of stations, viaducts and bridges in addition to the installation of electric traction systems, ticketing and passenger information systems, and other maintenance equipment. The metro line will have 19 stations, which include two sophisticated state-of-the-art elevations with five interchanges at urban terminals and will also provide user-friendly ticket machines.

The project will feature 18 bi-directional, low-floor, air-conditioned trams with seven modules each. The trains will be equipped with an advanced signaling system, automatic vehicle location system (AVLS), transit signal priority system (TSPS), and a driving simulator. The trains will be capable of accommodating 300 to 400 passengers and will have Wi-Fi facility.

The Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi and the Prime Minister of Mauritius, Pravind Jugnauth jointly inaugurated the Metro Express in Mauritius through a video conference in October 2019. Speaking on the occasion, Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted the significance of the Metro rail system in further enhancing the quality of life of the people of Mauritius, as well as in deepening the close ties between the two countries. The much

anticipated Metro Express Project will transform the mobility landscape in Mauritius as an efficient, faster and cleaner mode of public transport. Prime Minister Modi also said that the event was the first such occasion bringing Indian and Mauritian leaders together through a vide link across the Indian Ocean (Railpage, 2019).

The Prime Minister of Mauritius expressed his deep appreciation for the Indian support for this project as well as other development cooperation projects in Mauritius. He also conveyed his appreciation to all stakeholders for the timely execution of these two people-oriented projects. The two leaders also lauded the growth of India-Mauritius cooperation for the well-being of both the people and for peace and prosperity in the Indian Ocean region and in the world.

## New ENT Hospital

The project consisted of demolishing the old ENT hospital to establish a new state-of-the-art hospital providing world-class healthcare facility. The new ENT hospital, consisting of a hospital and administrative building, has an overall surface area of 12,000 square metre and funded to the tune of MUR 900 million.

The Government of Mauritius is determined to provide quality services to all citizens by placing healthcare at the core of its agenda with the priority of making the latest medical technology accessible to all. The hospital is a major project aiming to spearhead development in the country. The state-of-the-art energy-efficient ENT Hospital will significantly expand access to quality health-care and benefit the people in addition to being the first paperless E-Hospital in Mauritius.

The conversion of the old stone wooden structure of the ENT Hospital into a new modern hospital is in line with the strategy of the Ministry of Health and Quality of Life to improve the quality of hospital services through the provision of upgraded, renovated and completely new infrastructure, modern equipment, technologically-based and evidenced based specialised medical services.

In a statement to the press, the then Minister of Health and Quality of Life lauded the Government of

India for its unflinching support to the Government of Mauritius for the provision of financial assistance for the construction of the new ENT hospital. The Minister also recalled that the unveiling of the foundation stone of the new hospital was effected by the President of the Republic of India, Shri Ram Nath Kovind. In fact, the latter was on a State Visit on the occasion of celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the Independence of Mauritius. The Minister highlighted that both countries share strong bilateral relations that will usher a new era of cooperation in the future.

The Prime Minister of Mauritius, Pravind Jugnauth, and the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, proceeded on Thursday 3rd October 2019 with the E-Launching of the new ENT Hospital. In his address, through a videoconferencing, Shri Narendra Modi said that the new ENT Hospital will provide quality health care services to the population adding that all these projects reiterate the commitment of the Indian Government to support the development of the Mauritius (Le Journal, 2019).

Prime Minister Jugnauth expressed gratitude to the Prime Minister of India for accepting to grace the function through a videoconferencing adding that this gesture is another demonstration of India's affection and consideration for Mauritius. He underlined that Mauritius would have never been able to implement the new ENT Hospital in such a short time without the support and assistance of the Government of India.

## E-Health Project

The E-Health project will be implemented in a phased manner to enable the creation of standards compliant Electronics Health Records (EHRs) of the citizens on a pan-Mauritius basis along with the integration and interoperability of the EHRs through a comprehensive healthcare system. The main objective of the project is to have a single integrated source of information and a focal point of reference on all matters related to health with improved resource planning, allocation, monitoring and evaluation through the use of appropriate information technology.

E-Health project is envisaged to enable better continuity of care, secure and confidential health

data and records management, better diagnosis of the diseases, reduction in patient re-visits and even prevention of medical errors, better affordability, optimal information exchange to support better health outcome, better decision support system and thus eventually facilitating improvement in the reforms of treatment and care of public health at National level. The e-Health project would cover all the hospitals, Area Health Centres (AHCs) and Community Health Centres (CHCs).

The project will be financed under the Government of India and Exim Bank's supported Line of Credit extended to the State Bank of Mauritius Infrastructure Development Co. Ltd, a nominated agency of the Government of Mauritius (Phoolchund, 2019).

## Pan African E-Network Project

The Pan African e-Network Project was inaugurated on February 26, 2009 in Mauritius, which connected it to other African countries and India through a satellite and fiber-optic network. It has largely benefited Mauritius through the sharing of India's vast expertise in education and health care. All three modes namely VVIP, telemedicine and tele-education are currently operational (High Commission of India, 2018).

## Other Projects

Mauritius intends to seek further assistance to the tune of USD 200 million from the Government of India in order to further develop the port and related activities. Projects include an Oil Jetty at Albion; an Aviation Fuel Pipeline from the port to the airport; a joint petroleum storage project at Albion between Indian Oil, Mangalore Refineries and Petrochemical Ltd and State Trading Corporation of Mauritius and a breakwater in the port to house a marina. India will also provide a grant of USD 4 million and a line of credit of USD 52.3 million to finance the 'Trident Project', which aims to considerably upgrade facilities for maritime operations and surveillance by the National Coast Guard, the more so in the fight against drug trafficking in the Indian Ocean.

In a demonstration of India's commitment to further strengthen its ties with Mauritius and to

promote maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region, Indian Naval Ship Shardul recently arrived at Port Louis, Mauritius on a three-day visit. INS Shardul, an amphibious ship of the Indian Navy, is currently on a month long deployment in the Southern Indian Ocean in keeping with the vision of SAGAR - Security and Growth for all in the Region. INS Shardul has also escorted MCGS Victory, a ship built at Goa Shipyard Limited, India and handed over to the National Coast Guard. The ship will also assist local authorities in providing logistics and medical support to the outer islands of Agalega and St Brandon. Since 2009, the Indian Navy has been deploying ships to Mauritius bi-annually to assist in patrolling the vast Exclusive Economic Zone of the country based on requests by the Government of Mauritius.

Both countries also want to work towards a Triangular Cooperation (India-Mauritius-Africa) that can leverage on Mauritius wide network of bilateral and multilateral cooperation arrangements in the region. This will enable both countries to tap new markets and promote greater cross border investments in Africa, particularly in the fields of science and technology. By doing so, India will be able to emerge as a key partner in the government's New Africa Strategy. Other areas of collaboration will be in the field of film making, with the emergence of a Mauritian Film Industry high on the agenda; a further boost to the ICT sector with new value-addition investment; a Pharmaceutical Village is also in the pipeline, with the objective to cater for local needs and that of the region (Hamuth, 2017).

## Conclusion

The Indo-Mauritian ties are beyond the 'mind connect' and there is a lot of 'heart connect' between the two nations whether it is festivals or Bollywood or languages. The two Countries go a long way together and share a unique bonding, respect and love. When our government representatives meet and the collaborative treaties are signed, the overarching tendency to support each other is clearly evident at all levels.

Traditionally, India has been an important economic partner for Mauritius. Home to a host of Indian firms and a vast Indian-origin population,

Mauritius is a preferred destination for Indian companies to set up businesses on the island as well as in other African countries. The India-Mauritius Global Partnership Forum has served as a great tool to further strengthen the relationship between the two countries in the forthcoming future. It's important to mention that this relationship extends beyond trade business exchange.

There are several areas in which both countries are working together and there are many more avenues in which they can further increase collaboration such as skills development, particularly in the fields of science and technology.

Mauritius is already looking at increasing its economic base by actively promoting emerging sectors. Working closely with the bodies/forums already in place, Mauritius and India can identify priority sectors together not only in the offshore sector which has always been seen as the pillar of business exchange between the two nations but also in other key sectors such as Information Technology and Renewable energy whereby Mauritius could capitalize on the vast expertise of India.

## References

- Phoolchund, Harry. 2019. India-Mauritius: Delivering health for the people -Effective E-Health [Online]. Available from: <https://www.lexpress.mu/node/351704> [Accessed 07 January 2020]
- Fraser Institute. 2019. Economic Freedom of the World: 2019 Annual Report.
- High Commission of India. 2018. India Mauritius Bilateral [Online]. Available from: <https://hcimauritius.gov.in/pages?id=9avme&subid=yb8md&nextid=RdG7d> [Accessed 07 January 2020]
- High Commission of India. 2019. Rajiv Gandhi Science Centre [Online]. Available from: [https://hcimauritius.gov.in/pages?id=9avme&subid=yb8md&nextid=Qd\]2d&nextid=nel5a](https://hcimauritius.gov.in/pages?id=9avme&subid=yb8md&nextid=Qd]2d&nextid=nel5a) [Accessed 07 January 2020]
- Le Journal - GIS News. 2019. New ENT Hospital: Quality healthcare at the core of Government's agenda [Online]. Available from: <https://lejournel.mu/2019/08/26/new-ent-hospital-quality-healthcare-at-the-core-of-governments-agenda> [Accessed 07 January 2020]
- Railpage - Tram and Light Rail News. 2019. India and Mauritius Govt jointly inaugurate Metro Express in Mauritius [Online]. Available from: <http://www.railpage.com.au/news/s/india-and-mauritius-govt-jointly-inaugurates-metro-express-in-mauritius> [Accessed 07 January 2020]

- Railway Technology. 2019. Metro Express Project [Online]. Available from: <https://www.railway-technology.com/projects/metro-express-project> [Accessed 07 January 2020]
- Servansingh, Rajiv. 2017. India-Mauritius: An Evolving “Special Relationship” [Online]. Available from: <http://www.mauritiustimes.com/mt/india-mauritius-an-evolving-special-relationship> [Accessed 07 January 2020]
- Hamuth, Shaffick. 2017. Mauritius-India relations: Cultural roots rebound economic thrusts [Online]. Available from: <https://defimedia.info/mauritius-india-relations-cultural-roots-rebound-economic-thrusts> [Accessed 07 January 2020]
- World Bank. 2019. Ease of Doing Business Index.