

Bhojpuri Speaking Diaspora in Mauritius

“Mauritius, officially the Republic of Mauritius, is an island state off the southeast coast of the African continent in the southwest Indian Ocean, about 870 kilometers east of Madagascar. Mauritius was a British territory in the Indian Ocean”(K. Hazareesingh 1966). “It measures 720 square miles in area and has a population of 1.281 million people”(World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2010) whose ancestors came from France (the original settlers), Africa (slaves), India (indentured immigrants) and China (shopkeepers). “Mauritius did not have original inhabitants. Mauritius was discovered by the Portuguese in the early years of the sixteenth century and was named ‘Cerne’ after the boat of Diego FernandizPercira who discovered the island.Mauritius was first investigated by the Portuguese in the 16th century and subsequently settled by the Dutch who named it in honor of Prince Maurits van Nassau in the 17th century. The French assumed control of Mauritius in 1715 and the British captured the island in 1810. Independence from the UK was attained in 1968. There is no official language, however French is the dominant language of mass communication and business, the French-based Mauritian Creole is the main native language and serves as the country's lingua franca. Sixty-seven percent of the population of Mauritius is of Indian origin;twenty-eight percent is Creole, i.e., of mixed African and/or Indian andEuropean descent; three percent is Chinese; and two percent is European or ofEuropean origin. Ifwe take language as the criterion for differentiating sections of the population,we find that each ethnic section has a language or group of languages associatedwith it. Since the majority of immigrants were from India of which 60% came from eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, hence Bhojpuri is the dominant language. “However the Bhojpuri language has been heavily influenced by other languages in Mauritius. Mauritian Bhojpuri includes many Creole and English words, while the one spoken in Trinidad & Tobago has picked up some Caribbean words along with English”. The Bhojpuri-speaking Hindus have four major castes that are interpreted locally as *varnas*. They no longer represent strictly endogamous units (sub castes), but rather are extended social groups, interconnected by marriage and kinship, which often cut across caste lines. It would be unfair not to discuss the politics of Mauritius while discussing the role of Bhojpuri people in Mauritius. The present electoral system of Mauritius was initiated at the all-party London conference of 1965. It was decided that each of that 20 constituencies of mainland would be returning three members to the Legislative Assembly, and the ‘best loser’ system was introduced under which five seats were to

be distributed to the small political parties and under-represented communities, without disturbing the verdict of direct elections. The General Elections of 1967 was bitterly fought along ethnic considerations. The Hindu majority massively supported political independence while the minorities, fearing political domination by the Hindus, voted overwhelmingly against Independence and in favour of political integration/association with the UK. The Independence Party which comprised three political formations won 56 % of the votes while the anti-independence bloc captured a sizeable 44 %. A political vacuum was created as the two main political parties that had contested the Independence election of 1967 formed a coalition in 1969. This was effectively occupied by a radical left wing party (MMM) that embraced a very nationalistic and an ethnic free platform. When the LP/PMSD coalition of 1969 eventually collapsed, the two parties contested the 1976 General Elections separately. However, they had to face the daunting challenge of the MMM. It is important to note that from 1967 to 2000, the Prime Minister has always been a Hindu, coming from the most important subgroup in the Hindu community, the Bhojpuri speaking population.