

*Socio-Economic Development in Multi-Cultural Societies: The Mauritian Experiment*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to bring to you very warm and cordial greetings from the Republic of Mauritius.

Since assuming office as the current Balfour African President-in-Residence at the African Presidential Archives and Research Center of Boston University, I have been very much looking forward to my visit to Northeastern University, if only in a spirit of good neighborhoodliness. I am equally pleased at the opportunity given to me to share with you my views on Socio-Economic Development in Multi-Cultural Societies with particular reference to my country.

Allow me to make a trip down memory lane and to relate to you how Mauritius has fared, on the economic plane, since the 1980's when I first became a Member of Parliament under a new Government. At that time, our country was grappling with a number of problems. Unemployment was rampant while inflation and public debt had reached almost unmanageable levels. It is against this rather gloomy background that the new Government set itself to work to bring back the country on track.

I leave it to you to imagine how immense and challenging the task ahead of us was. We had to live up to the expectations of the Mauritian people to whom we had made many promises. We meant to keep those promises through a realistic vision of the future and a pragmatic approach to

economic and social reforms. There was also a strong political will and determination to democratize various sectors of our economy.

Today, Mauritius presents an all together different picture. We have been able to make steady progress, despite the fact that our country does not have any natural or mining resources. Besides, it is remotely situated from the major world centers and is often the prey to devastating tropical cyclones, not to speak of occasional prolonged droughts. All the same, Mauritius has experienced a remarkable transformation in all spheres of economic activity during the last two decades. Many observers find in this transformation, an economic miracle. I am more inclined to believe that it is thanks to the determination and sheer hard work of the government and people of Mauritius that the country was able to achieve a steady rate of growth, full employment for quite some time and to diversify its economic base which rested almost entirely on sugar cane and which now comprises agriculture, industry, tourism, the financial services sector and, until recently, the Information Technology Sector, and tomorrow, the Fishing Hub of the Indian Ocean. Mauritians can legitimately take pride in the fact that without a single sheep in the country, we are today amongst the biggest exporters of woolen products.

In Mauritius, we were inspired right from the start, by a socialist policy and we are obsessed with the idea of ensuring that the benefits of our economic success are enjoyed by all Mauritians, irrespective of their rank or class. Our main concerns were to find ways and means of attracting investors, to provide jobs to our people, to improve our road network and other infrastructural facilities and to make available free education and free

health services to every citizen of the country. Our objective was two-fold- to create national wealth and to share it with the people who produce it.

The Republic of Mauritius is a sovereign democratic state within the Commonwealth. It is one of the very few countries in our part of the world where a democratic system of government, adopted after independence, has survived. It is indeed one where the pillars, on which true democracy rests, are all present. Besides, in view of the tremendous potential of the democratic tool to redress many of the imbalances which exist in many societies, it is our constant endeavor to further consolidate the base of democracy. Being a pluri-cultural country in the process of nation building, we had to secure unity among our countrymen and also to ensure the protection of minorities. Hence, our motto of “Unity in Diversity.”

As we cherish liberty, freedom and democracy, we had to see to it that our Constitution established the separation of powers between the Legislative, the Executive and the Judiciary. It also guarantees to the citizen his fundamental rights i.e. freedom of conscience, freedom of association, of movement and opinion, freedom of expression, freedom of creed and religious belief as well as the right to private property.

I shall now turn to the social aspect of my country’s evolution. As you are aware, we are presently living in a fast shrinking world and globalization seems to be the order of the day. However, it would be unwise you assume that the world, constituted as it is with people of different religions, languages and cultures will achieve uniformity. This view is shared by George Leo, the Singapore Minister of Information and the Arts

who, addressing a Conference on the Relevance of his country's experience for Africa in November, 1993, stated that, and I quote "No amount of globalization is going to make humanity one whole. Communities, the world over, are integrated into a national mosaic and the mosaic is rarely all of one piece. Therefore in the making of a multi-cultural society, it is imperative that good governance should take care of some basic principles. First of all, the majority group must never take the minority for granted. The second principle is to allow every community group to preserve its own cultural heritage and to develop its own character within the national framework, thereby making room for diversity. Another essential requisite, towards this end, is a firm, fair and honest government with a pragmatic and non-ideological approach towards solving problems. For democracy to work, it must take into account the complex grain of a multi-cultural society."

After these general remarks on what may be considered to be some essential conditions for the emergence of a multi-cultural society where mutual understanding, peace and harmony will reign supreme and where mistrust and suspicion will give way to transparency, justice and meritocracy, I should like now to make some observations on the Mauritian experiment.

Mauritius did not have any indigenous population and has been populated by slaves from Africa, indentured labour from India and immigrants from China and Europe. For nearly two centuries most of the immigrants and their descendants notably from China, Europe, India, each with their own culture, used to look up to their respective countries of

origin—and to this day some still do—to maintain a close and continuing contact with their ancestral traditions and cultures.

Somehow those who came from Africa including Madagascar as slaves and their descendants gradually lost all contact with that continent and a culture of their own gradually evolved and was passed on from generation to generation. It is to them that we owe our native language—Creole or le mauricien—which can be considered our first national language.

Over the years, each component of the Mauritian society has been enriching itself by progressively assimilating elements from other cultures. This tendency has been accelerating since independence in 1968. That is how today, the country has inherited a cultural mosaic which, though constituted from fragments of diverse origins, is held together with the cement of understanding, mutual respect and tolerance.

If such positive results have been achieved, it is largely due to the fact that unity in diversity has been the official policy of nation-building in Mauritius since independence.

In a draft report prepared in the context of the National Long-Term Perspective Study—Vision 2020, a working group on Society and Culture pointed out that, and I quote:- “While the principle of diversity has been functioning at the level of ethnicity, the principle of unity has always been in operation at the level of the nation. The principle of diversity here recognizes the existence of group specificity in terms of language, culture, religion and the principle of unity recognizes the existence of the individual

enjoying equal rights as a citizen living in a free, democratic and secular state.”

These two principles have been complementary, not conflictual, in their interaction, which explains the remarkable degree of peaceful coexistence within the plural framework which has characterized post-independence of Mauritius. The country has thus achieved a high level of integration at national level in the sectors which govern public life: education, health, law, social security, economy, government. In the domains of private life- language, culture, religion—integration has operated largely at group level, with the state adopting, at least officially, a “do-not-touch” policy.

If, in our country there were originally no indigenous Mauritians as such, we all the same have today authentic Mauritians who are lovers of freedom and well-known for the warmth of their welcome and hospitality, who with equal ease wear shirts or kurtas, sarees or skirts, who hum tunes of the Beatles or Indian singers, who watch Indian movies, Chinese documentaries and American clips and who express themselves equally well both in language of Moliere and that of Shakespeare.

With regard to Education- free from pre-primary to tertiary- all students learn the same core subjects, are entitled to the same basic facilities and consequently develop similar aspirations. Opportunities are also provided for the learning of ancestral languages, besides English and French by all those who are interested in them, be it at the primary or secondary level. Creole which is widely spoken and understood by all is not taught.

One simply acquires it. That is why this language has been suggested as a medium of teaching at primary level.

There is also Bhojpuri language, a distorted form of Hindi, which is more wide-spread in the rural areas. But, the fact of communicating in one language rather than another— English, French, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Urdu, Tamil, Telegu, Marithi, Mandarin, or Creole—does not in any way dilute or diminish the profound sense of belonging to a common motherland. In the diversity of languages, our vernacular is a unifying factor.

Likewise, in the diversity of our cuisine, the Mauritian Rougaille, which is neither the European Sauce Rouge nor the Indian tomato sauce, stands out as one of our common dish. On the other hand, the sega, which has no equivalent in African culture, has come to assert itself as the very symbol of cultural mauricianism.

To my mind, this sense of oneness which manifests itself in so many spheres constitute our strength as a Nation and although some people still find pleasure in underlining differences, I would rather stress the cultural richness which makes our national pride.

This unity and oneness translate itself in the spirit of understanding and tolerance which has come to characterize the Mauritian society, where each and everyone respects his neighbour's culture and where no religion is subjected to any disdain from anybody. The significance of Divali or Eid is not understood by Hindus and Muslims only, just like it is not the Chinese or Christians only who are aware of the true significance of the Chinese Spring

Festival or Christmas. This sense of belonging to a common nation will assume greater proportions as we become fully conscious of the fact that national unity cannot be subordinated to any class or ethnic considerations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before resuming my seat, let me highlight another aspect of Mauritius. Strategically located in the Indian Ocean at the crossroads of Africa and Asia, Mauritius is reputed for its beautiful countryside and its white sandy beaches and transparent lagoon. Mauritius enjoys a maritime sub-tropical climate and is therefore an all-year-round holiday destination. If I have chosen to make mention of this, it is because there are very few Americans among the 650,000 plus tourists visiting us every year. May I suggest that for your next holidays, you plan a trip to Mauritius?

Thank You.