

Speech by the Hon A.K. Gayan, SC, Minister of Tourism
International Conference on ‘Contribution of Indian Diaspora in
Nation Building: Mauritius, a Case Study’

Valedictory Session - Friday 06 July 2018 at 14.00 hours
Mahatma Gandhi Institute

I am deeply honoured to have been invited by the Antar-Rashtriya Sahayog Parishad (ARSP) to participate in the valedictory session of this very important event intended to promote the influence of the Indian Diaspora in nation building and the socio-economic development of Mauritius.

I wish to pay tribute to the very important contribution the ARSP has made to promote the ancestral world view of India, i.e. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam’, which means ‘the whole world is one family’.

We are particularly pleased that Mauritius has been chosen as the venue for this International Conference with the theme ‘Contribution of Indian Diaspora in Nation Building: Mauritius, a Case Study’. We are happier that the event coincides with the 50th anniversary of our independence, which has such a historical significance for all communities. In fact you may wish to know that, whenever there was a Hindu wedding in the past, the flag that was made to fly was the Indian flag. At present it is the Mauritian flag that is proudly displayed although the occasional Indian flag also is put up. This shows that the transition to a nationhood is well under way. A nation develops an identity with time and this is even more time-consuming in a multi-ethnic country like ours.

From the outline of your Programme, I can see that this two-day Conference has explored at length the different stages and facets of the contribution of the Indian Diaspora in building modern Mauritius, as well as the role the Diaspora has played and continues to play in nation building in all those countries where Indians went to settle. A number of key issues have been addressed such as democracy, modernization, education and technology. I am sure the discussions on these matters have been rich, and will prompt you to pursue further deliberations on these highly engaging topics. I must here strike a word of caution. States have their own interests and it would be wrong to address the issues relating to the diaspora in a romantic way and to consider only culture, religion etc. An adult approach is required.

India has been extremely generous in its policy of free movement of its people. Over the years, more than 30 million members of the Indian Diaspora have settled in more than one hundred countries. They have to a large extent successfully settled and developed a sense of belonging, whilst maintaining their cultural heritage and upholding their values and beliefs.

The historical importance of the labour diaspora for the Indian Ocean region as a whole is that it was the largest movement of population to take place in this part of the world during the 19th century and early 20th century. Between 1834 and 1924, more than 454,000 laborers were recruited in India and brought to Mauritian shores. More than two-thirds of them remained on the island, redefining the social, demographic, economic, religious and political landscape of the country.

There is a growing international recognition of the importance of the Diaspora in the quest for identity and cultural legacy. Many countries have schemes to cultivate links with their Diaspora and some countries even have Ministries and Diplomats designated specifically to handle Diaspora affairs. The Diaspora is a prime example of the influence of 'soft power'.

Let me say one thing about how India is reinforcing this linkage. The OCI – Overseas Citizen of India – Pass is a bond between India and the Diaspora. But questions may be asked about the limitations imposed by the OCI Card? The limitations are the ineligibility to vote in elections and the prohibition to purchase farm land. This illustrates the conflict between the State and the Diaspora. The issues of citizenship and sovereignty overlap, and at times it is impossible to reconcile full citizenship and the Diaspora. Nothing stops India to revisit these limitations bearing in mind that very few people would take advantage of full citizenship.

China has a special arrangement, whereby persons of Chinese origin are co-opted to sit as members of the Legislature. France has a number of seats in Parliament reserved for overseas French people. India could consider such an arrangement to consolidate the process of bonding.

There are certain issues which people from the diaspora raise about the role of India. The basis of international relations is the sovereignty of states and the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of another State. Let me illustrate how these issues are raised. In Fiji, the Indian -origin Prime Minister Mahendra Chowdhury was overturned by a military coup. Could India have done something about that? Should India have done something about that? Could, for example, India have led an international effort to support the democratically- elected Prime Minister?

The second issue I want to raise is the plight of all Asians who were expelled by the dictator of Uganda, Idi Amin Dada, in the early 1970s. What could India have done to come to the help of the Asian Ugandans? Today those Asians who went to the United Kingdom are among the wealthiest Britons.

I do not have answers to these issues but, with the rise of India as a growing economic and military power, we may explore new ways of meeting the concerns of the Indian diaspora in respecting international correctness.

Africa will emerge as the continent of the future. With immeasurable natural resources and a young population coupled with increasing prosperity, it is now wonder that China has been engaged there for centuries. The China- Africa Forum is a major event for the calendar of the African Presidents and Heads of Government. India has waded in with a similar event. India must avoid the pitfalls of China in Africa and engage with Africans in a spirit of shared values and interests. India has the advantage of democracy and the English language. These are non-negligible assets for Africans. Opening higher education institutions in India to Africans will enhance its influence over those who will eventually become the leaders and elite of their respective countries. The former Soviet Union did it, China is doing it now and India would be well advised to follow. Shaping the minds of future African leaders is within India's reach.

As we are all aware, Mauritius has nurtured a very special relationship with India and all Governments since independence have maintained

excellent relations with the Indian authorities. The frequent high-level visits and the programme of assistance in many areas are testimony to the quality of this special relationship. We respect each other as sovereign nations but, whenever one country needs the other, every effort is made to meet that need.

Mauritius has always extolled the virtue of a diplomacy which has prioritized a policy of friends to all. We take pride in our multicultural and multiethnic heritage and are widely considered an example of tolerance among various communities, religions and cultures that have been coexisting in peace for hundreds of years. There are not many places in the world where such diversity is concentrated in such a small area. Within a radius of a few hundred metres, we can find a Hindu temple, a mosque, a pagoda, a Christian church and other religious shrines. The contribution of each and every community to our socio-economic development continues to be valued and celebrated.

As Minister of Tourism, my philosophy is that tourism contributes overwhelmingly to building alliances among people from different backgrounds and cultures. Tourism is, therefore, the prime example of people to people diplomacy. Similarly, the Diaspora also has an important role to play in promoting diplomacy so that people relations and can prosper. It is against this backdrop that I make an appeal to our Diaspora around the world to give back to the country in whichever way possible.

Connecting with the ancestral land takes many forms in this modern world. There is no corner of India that cannot be accessed through the Internet. Bollywood and the rising influence of India as a world power.

Having said this, I would like to end on a note of thanks to the ARSP for putting together this event together with all the local stakeholders at such an opportune moment. We look forward to welcoming you again to Mauritius in the near future for more fruitful collaboration.