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Island Diplomacy

70 pc of Mauritius' population may be PIOs but that is not enough reason for India, especially the Sangh Parivar, to interfere in its political process, warns Kishan S. Rana

In April-end, the Indian High Commissioner to Mauritius was abruptly withdrawn. Unofficially, he was alleged to have interfered in the political process in that island state. Unspecified references to financial misdemeanors were also blended into the accounts that appeared in the media — something which occurs from time to time in every diplomatic service when officials perceive that they are far removed from the tight scrutiny back home and local conditions warrant adaptation in rules and procedures, generally for self-benefit. Personal lapses are lamentable, but professional misconduct is much more serious. I address the setting in which India finds itself in this small island state of 1.2 million, where almost 70 per cent of the people are of Indian descent. What lessons should we draw from our mixed experiences in this country?

I had the privilege of representing India in Mauritius from September 1989 to May 1992, and cherish several friendships there that have survived the decade since that interlude. This is not about reliving old memories, but presenting an objective account of India's goals and actions.

Mauritius is different from Fiji, Guyana or Uganda — or any other place to which British colonists took indentured labour from India to cultivate sugarcane or build railways — in that this island paradise that Dutch seafarers discovered in the 16th century had no indigenous population. Every Mauritian has come from someplace else, whether it is the scions of the 14 famous Franco-Mauritian families that own some 50 per cent of the sugar plantations, or the Creoles who are descendants of slave labourers from Madagascar, Mozambique and West Africa, or the Hakka Chinese whose trading brought them to the island.

In terms of ethnicity, the broad mix of Mauritius is: 70 per cent of Indian descent; about 25 per cent Creole; 3 per cent Chinese, and 1 per cent French. But it is the religious affiliation that is the defining element — 52 per cent Hindu; 20 per cent Muslim (divided into the descendants of the indentured labour from Bihar and East UP, plus an affluent minority of rich trading and industrial families who are descendants of Gujarati migrants); and 25 per cent Christian. The Hindus sub-divide themselves along their regions of origin, with the Bhojpuri-Hindi speakers of Bihar-UP forming the majority and the Tamils, Telugus and Maharashtrians bringing up the minority. Political power has always resided in the hands of the "majority of the majority", irrespective of whether the ruling government was formed by the Labour Party of Ramgoolam or the MSM of Jugnauth.

This heady heterogeneity could easily have fractured into a divided country or

simmering ethno-religious discontent. Instead, it has nurtured a modern state that is remarkable for its ethnic-religious accommodation and economic progress. The different communities work together but lead separate social lives, celebrating their own festivals without outward rivalry or envy. Its only post-Independence aberration in the shape of inter-community clashes occurred in 1998, resulting from inept handling by the police of localised Creole resentments.

Since 1981, the island has moved to a high growth track, abandoning its excessive dependence on sugarcane. In many ways, Mauritius has become a developing state exemplar, with agile public-private partnership in economy diversification covering textiles, manufacture and the knowledge industry, and a per capita GDP of \$4000. No wonder then that the World Bank hails it as a development model.

India's interests in Mauritius are straightforward. It is a near-neighbour with strong connections. First, as a nation of stability, harmony and accommodation, in its self-image as a "pluri-cultural" and "rainbow" state, it serves as a counterpoint to other countries where old migrant Indian communities face tension and resentment. Second, as a prosperous state, it is an interesting, if small, economic partner and a multiplier for wider economic partnerships in its region of Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean Rim. Third, in the past, when apartheid ruled South Africa and the memory of mercenary-led attacks on the neighbouring state of the Seychelles in the mid-1980s was vivid, India also extended a measure of discreet security support. Happily that situation has passed and the region is free of tension. India retains a residual interest in the stability of the region.

In the past, India manifested direct political interest. At the time of the 1983 elections, when the country's founding father and Labour Party leader, Sewosoor Ramgoolam, was challenged by Jugnauth's MSM, the Indian envoy adopted a partisan role in support of the latter, at New Delhi's behest. Thereafter, we learnt fairly quickly that this did not produce any special advantage. We also understood that any government in Mauritius would see its self-advantage in a cooperative relationship with India, so it did not pay to get too involved. This has broadly remained the official policy for almost two decades, but it faced an internal Indian challenge.

A few in India, often belonging to the Sangh Parivar, transport the Indian political experience to Mauritius and misapply this to its political scene. It is indeed relevant for India to urge unity among the regional sub-groups of the People of Indian Origin (PIOs), but not to the point of choosing between their political parties, or their power-sharing formulae involving other ethnic communities. In the recent past, some self-appointed Indian political advisors have tended to favour the Labour Party over Jugnauth's MSM (I encountered the same phenomenon in the 1991 election on the island, when the MSM won). This year, the hot political issue has been the power-sharing formula that Prime Minister Jugnauth had worked out with his longtime associate, and equally frequent rival, Paul Berenger, who commands a sizable following among the Creoles, when they won the last election in August 2000. (Jugnauth and Berenger first joined hands in the erstwhile political party, the MMM, but fell out barely a year after their original 1983 triumph, and have had a checkered relationship ever since). Under their compromise, Jugnauth was to hold the prime ministership for half the term, and then move on to the office of President, ceding the chair for Berenger — who has long thirsted for this

pinnacle. It is the implementation of this power transfer that many Hindu politicians oppose, though Jugnauth, his son Pravin (currently a Minister, who would assume the office of Deputy Prime Minister), and the MSM remains committed to the formula.

It is hard to imagine any government in Mauritius that would be inimical to Indian interests, given the web of mutually beneficial connections that exist. Nor is there any overwhelming strategic interest that this distant island serves for India that might be compromised under a government led by Berenger, given the ethnic power arithmetic. In essence, the vital Indian interest in Mauritius remains in the continuing welfare and advancement of its entire people, including the large community of PIOs. We also have a stake in continuing trade investment and other economic activities, none of which are of exclusive character, or under threat from third sources, beyond normal competitive forces. The India-Mauritius treaty that has funneled foreign investments into India from third countries, taking advantage of local tax-exemptions for such off-shore investments, is a minor issue, but useful from an Indian perspective of attracting FDI.

There are two other tasks that few in India have considered. First, the main local challenge for the ethnic Indians in Mauritius is that too few of them have moved from worker and professional status to entrepreneurship, especially the majority Hindus. We encounter the same phenomenon in the other lands originally peopled by indentured labour from here. India can offer practical help, like the entrepreneurship development training programme organised in 1991 with the help of IDBI. We can also urge the different associations of the Indian community to develop such economic orientation and practice mutual self-help. Second, while the Indians of Mauritius are our natural friends on that island, we also need better ties with the other communities that we have tended to ignore — whether it is the Creole or the Franco-Mauritians. My experience has been that this can be done without any local alienation.

Put another way, this is no more than the message of secular diplomacy, centered on a true reading of our long-term interests.

(The writer is a former diplomat and author of Inside Diplomacy and Bilateral Diplomacy)