The 'Land of the Vaish'? Caste Structure and Ideology in Mauritius

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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> *'Over here, castes don't matter. Anyway, castes don't exist in Mauritius.'*
> [...a few weeks later...]: *'Castes, they have nothing to do with religion, nothing to do with god. It only matters for old people, to marry the children.'*
> The Secretary of a Mauritian Hindu temple association
> *'I didn't tell you* [my caste] *because I don't believe in this'* [*mo pa inn dire ou mo pa croire lor la*].

1   Indian society has often been defined by its specific socio-religious mode of segmentation: the caste system. Founded on the Hindu ideology of relative purity, this system regulates the hierarchy and complementarity of the various castes. The caste system is based on prohibitions of physical contact, commensality and intermarriage, but also on ritual practices and professional activities. For the purposes of this essay, it is sufficient to distinguish, on the one hand, castes as *varna* dividing society into four orders (the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra)—a conception inherited from Brahminical ideology and, on the other hand, thousands of castes as *jati*, an inherited and endogamous community attached to a *varna*. While the ability to perform certain rituals and to be initiated depends on *varna*, everyday life is mostly governed by the relative and subtle hierarchy of *jati*.

2   Mauritius recently became independent (1968), and is mainly inhabited by Indian and Hindu descendants of indentured labourers. The study of castes in Mauritius questions the assumptions of classical Indian studies. Going against the tendency to consider the caste system (a social structure), Hinduism (a religion at the origin of caste ideology) and India (a national territory) in a consubstantial and exclusive relation, the Mauritian context raises the following important questions: is there such a thing as a caste system outside India? Is there such a thing as a casteless Hinduism? In other words, what happens to Hindu ideology when it travels abroad?

3   This article also aims at expanding our knowledge of Mauritian society, especially with regard to interactions between 'Creoleness' (an identity born out of the encounter of various cultures that have been brutally displaced in the plantation context) and 'Indianness' (claiming solely Indian descent) that sustain all claims to national identity (Servan-Schreiber 2014). It draws both on a critical reading of the bibliography dealing with castes in Mauritius, and on original empirical data compiled between 2009 and 2011.[1] Clearing the way for a totally unknown aspect of Mauritian culture, the survey collected narratives of people of Indian descent, mostly Bhojpuri, who were born in the plantation camps (during the 1920s-1940s), and sometimes still lived there.[2]

4   But there is another more pragmatic challenge to deal with, namely breaking the silence on a topic which is still highly taboo for Mauritian society and has received little attention in the literature.

The terms of the debate

Mauritian history

5   The history of Mauritius is to be understood under the headings of the history of colonisation, the history of the sugar industry and labour-force history (slavery and indenture). The French (1715-1810) massively imported slaves from Africa and Madagascar, as well as from India. But the plantation society[3] centred on the sugar industry really took off at the turn of the 19th century. When the British took control of the island in 1810, the Franco-Mauritian sugar oligarchy remained in charge. With the boom of the sugar industry, the British organised the indenture system, recruiting (mostly in British India) labourers on five-year contracts in order to compensate for the labour-force shortage following the abolition of slavery (1835). Between 1835 and 1907, an estimated 500,000 indentured labourers, two-thirds of which were Bhojpuri, arrived in Mauritius (Deerpalsingh 2000: 45).

6   During the 1880s, economic problems forced planters to sell parts of their less profitable lands (Allen 1999), which was also a means to sedentarise the labourers who had completed their five-year contracts near the plantations. Some indentured labourers, mainly the *sirdar* (overseer) gradually became small planters. As a matter of fact, with his status as an overseer, the *sirdar* enjoyed better wages and acted as a (sometimes usurious) money-lender. Because of their access to land, some indentured labourers eventually settled in villages outside the plantation and, according to Jean Benoist (1989), recreated the Indian social context. By the Second World War half of the cultivated land in Mauritius was owned by descendants of indentured labourers (Hazareesingh 1973: 198).

7   We must first look at the Mauritian plantation society to understand the upward mobility of these descendants. Relations with India were used to strengthen and legitimise this rise in the social hierarchy. For instance, in 1935, on the occasion of the centenary of the indenture system, Indian nationalists helped the new Indo-Mauritian elite to commemorate what was at the time called the 'Indian colonisation' of the island (Carsignol 2011: 211). And yet, from the 1950s onwards, relations between India and Mauritius began to taper off (Carsignol 2011: 65). In the context of rapidly changing India-Mauritius relations, members of the Indo-Mauritian elite asserted themselves, during the first half of the 20th century, as leaders and conquerors of the island, but also as objective allies of the British from whom they would later obtain political power. Since the advent of Independence, political power has been held by descendants of Indian indentured labourers (mainly Hindu Bhojpuris from the Vaish caste[4]) who represent 60% of the population, most of which is Hindu.[5] After many decades of distant relations with India, the 1990s witnessed a revival of cultural, political and economic links. India thus rediscovered the advantages (in terms of economic gain and 'soft power') of its 'diaspora,' while Indo-Mauritians were comforted in their perception of belonging to a prestigious civilisation (Carsignol 2011).

8   What Rosabelle Boswell (2006) has described as the '*malaise créole*'[6] emerged in this context of Hindu hegemony. The expression highlights the state of poverty, the lack of political power and the poor cultural visibility of these Creoles, descendants of slaves who represent one third of the overall population. Nowadays, Mauritian political and identity claims reflect systematic opposition between an Indianness refashioned by the community in power and a Creoleness that was formerly shared but is increasingly rejected by the Hindus' new narrative of the indenture system (Claveyrolas 2012).

Creole Hinduism

9   In Mauritius, using the expression 'Creole Hindus' is considered a misinterpretation or, worse, a provocation. The 'Creole' category refers to individuals identified as African or Malagasy slave descendants, Black and Catholic, unlike in the Caribbean or in the neighbouring island of Réunion, where all those born in the islands are considered as Creole. The Mauritian 'Creole' category is built on its opposition to the Hindu category.[7]

10   And yet, in literal terms, a Hindu is an individual practising a religion (Hinduism), and a Creole is an individual born in a society structured by slavery and the plantation system, which means that a Hindu can indeed be Creole. This points not only to the possibility of being Hindu outside of India, but also that Hindu Mauritians share with Mauritian descendants of slaves more than is generally assumed in Mauritius—in particular, the structures, constraints and consequences of the plantation system. If, since 1860 (Carter 1995: 271), two-thirds of the Mauritian population is of Indian origin, how can we account for Creole society, built on the dual opposition between white masters and black slaves? Moreover, what happens to Hindu culture, whose ideals of purity have so often been understood as inherently resistant to the *métissage* which sustains Creoleness?[8]

11   In the absence of any native population, Mauritian society grew out of the at times conflicting contacts between various cultures from Europe, Africa and Asia. All communities share the following characteristics: they have been uprooted from their original homeland and have worked and lived in the plantation context, a totalitarian and extremely constraining structure. Mauritian society thus forces the anthropologist to

confront a kind of Hinduism specific to the plantation society that must be studied with the dual perspective of its Creoleness and Indianness (Benoist 1998, Claveyrolas 2014). This is precisely what is at stake here: the interaction between India and the plantation among Hindu indentured labourers (Benoist 1989). At the heart of the issue, anthropologists and Mauritian elites have repeatedly debated whether Hindu cultural dimensions have been lost, retained, or temporarily put aside before they can be reinvented. By offering a snapshot of the caste system in Mauritius, this paper hopes to contribute crucial information to the debate.

Castes in Mauritius: what is told, what is known

12   Mauritian discourses on caste seem to hesitate between ignorance and denial. But given the recurrent scandals, anecdotes and debates about caste, there is another hidden dimension.

13   Caste is not explicitly formulated in Mauritian social relations. Indeed, most individuals first pretend to be totally ignorant about their own caste identity. There is a consensus, shared even by institutions representing Mauritian Hinduism, to look down on caste as barbaric and invalid since the end of the indenture system. This is the recurrent criticism that Mauritian Hindus address to Indian society: that it is being perverted by a caste system that is both unfair and backward. The newspaper *Le Mauricien* (14 May 2012) published a cartoon representing the Prime Minister pretending to be offended: 'I can't understand why, in 2012, people still think in terms of castes.' The cartoonist then puts the following words in the mouth of the Prime Minister: 'I myself have three Rajput [former Dusadh Untouchables] ministers, which shows that I don't think that way…' This ambiguous justification refers to the implicit caste-based quotas[9] governing access to the highest positions in the Mauritian administration.

14   Most Hindu sub-communities in Mauritius assemble in 'socio-cultural associations' formed along caste lines (Gahlot Rajput Maha Sabha, the organisation of the Rajput caste, or Vaish Mukhti Sangh, for the Vaish caste). The reformist Arya Samaj, imported to Mauritius in the beginning of the 20th century, denounces the caste system in principle. But the organisation split along caste lines again, resulting in the creation of the Arya Ravived Pracharini Sabha in 1935 by Chamar Untouchables, and renamed 'Ravived.'[10]

15   Mentioning the caste system in Mauritius is politically incorrect. Suffice it to say that the issue of the French magazine *L'Express* (9 May 2010), carrying a front page on the caste system in Mauritius, was publicly burnt by a so-called *Front Commun Hindou* (Hindu Common Front) bringing together various militant associations. But the taboo is relative. Firstly because the official taboo can well become the very foundation of the silent reproduction of caste, as has been the case with Indian secularism's caste taboo.[11] Secondly because electoral contexts regularly encourage the mobilisation and the resurgence of caste identities. In 2010, a minister actually declared in Hindi during an electoral meeting held in front of the Vaish Welfare Association that 'the Prime Minister belongs to the Vaish first, then to the country and, finally, to the world. When the Prime Minister and the government are yours, what do you have to fear? You have total control over the country' (*Défimédia*, 9 February 2010).

16   This shows that there is in fact a basic classification that reproduces the Indian Brahminical caste structure based on *varna.* You are identified as a Maraz (Brahmin), a Babujee (Kshatriya)[12] or a Vaish (Vaishya). These three categories are known as *grand*

nasyon[13] or 'high castes,' as opposed to all others, known as *ti nasyon* or 'low castes .' *Grand nasyon* here corresponds to the Hindu *dvija* (twice-born). An individual, a neighbourhood or a shrine can be classified *ti* or *grand nasyon*. Depending on the context, the Vaish can be considered intermediary castes.

17   There are actually subtler classifications of castes as *jati*,[14] such as the Katri[15] among the Babujee, the Ahir, Kurmi or Koiri among the Vaish, the Chamar, the Dusadh or the Nonia among lower castes. Mauritius also hosts descendants of tribal populations[16] who were some of the first indentured labourers (Tinker 1974: 49). Called the *Junglee*, they are associated with the Untouchables[17]: 'They have dark skin,' are 'rude' and 'often stay among themselves, up-hill, over there,' as an old Bhojpuri woman put it.

18   The constant mix-up of *varna* and *jati* muddies the waters. The majority of Mauritians declare themselves Vaish rather than Koiri or Kurmi, terms that are more precise but lesser known, especially among non-Hindus. Mauritian usage thus differs from Indian usage where *jati* remains more relevant on a daily basis, and where the Vaishyas never amount to a majority. Moreover, subdivisions into family names and *gotra* (lineages)[18] lead to more complications. For instance, the Gwalbansh lineage from the Ahir *jati* is named and perceived as a caste. People generally mix up caste and geographical origin (the 'Bengali caste'), community (the 'Marathi caste') and even ethnic belonging (the 'Hindu caste' or the 'Chinese caste').[19] Moreover, the Brahmin category in Mauritius refers only to those acting as priests.[20]

19   Most studies on Mauritian society tend to take these general local categories for granted. They agree with Vertovec that: 'Probably the most significant socio-religious change that occurred among Hindus in the Caribbean [...] was the attenuation of the caste system' (2000: 52). The most important work focusing on Mauritian castes was published in 1994, under the title *The Disintegration of Caste and Changing Concepts of Indian Ethnic Identity in Mauritius*. Its author, Oddvar Hollup, argues that the Indian caste system has been considerably eroded in Mauritius. This conclusion is supposedly valid for the entire Hindu diaspora,[21] especially for those coming from a background of indenture. Ghasarian (1991) for the island of Réunion, Vertovec (2000) for Trinidad, Jayawardena (1971) and Mishra (1979) for Fiji or Kumar (2012) for South-Africa, all agree that the Indian caste system 'was never successfully established overseas' (Hollup 1994: 297). They do, however, acknowledge that the 'idea' of caste has been preserved (Mayer 1967: 17). This conclusion is also shared by scholars focusing on modern Hindu diasporas in Western countries. Kurien (2004: 40) and Burghart (1987: 12) have both noted, with regard to the American and British contexts respectively, that 'castes have survived, but not the 'system.'[22]

20   The literature on the subject stresses that caste (at least as a *system*) seems residual or ineffective in Mauritius. This diagnosis may be criticised for two reasons. On the one hand, it conveys a distorted image of the Indian caste system as incapable of any new development or adaptation. The Mauritian caste system is seen as equivalent to a lighter version of the Indian caste system and any evolution is understood as a result of the changes brought about by the indenture system. On the other hand, we may end up with a rather superficial perception of Mauritian realities, one that does not go beyond the identification of specific castes as distinct social groups and underestimates the importance of the system, its hierarchy and its ideology.

Castes and the indenture system

21   The main argument supporting the disappearance or attenuation of the caste system in Mauritius presents the history of indenture as entirely incompatible with the ritual requirements and prohibitions of the caste system. Indenturedness meant leaving India, but also breaking the taboo of crossing the ocean, or *kala pani* (black waters). In addition, it was impossible to respect Hindu rules of purity both aboard the ships that travelled to Mauritius and in the plantations.

The caste background of indentured labourers

22   The indenture system and its narratives are at the very core of today's identity politics in Mauritius. Indentured labourers have been described as slaves kidnapped in India (Tinker 1974) or, conversely, as proud conquerors who came to Mauritius to spread the wisdom of Indian civilisation (Hazareesingh 1973). Obviously, there is no unified story or experience of indenture. Indenture in the 1830s was poorly regulated from a legal standpoint and recruited mainly among tribal populations. It has little in common with indenture in the 1850s, and even less with that of the first decades of the 20th century. Single men were recruited first and were later joined by women and couples from the 1870s onwards. In the first decades, candidates had no knowledge whatsoever of the realities of indenture, which was not the case at all 50 years later (Carter 1995). Individual situations also varied considerably between Sepoy soldiers fleeing colonial India after the 1857 mutiny and deceived pilgrims kidnapped during fairs or indebted farmers dreaming of a better future. The resilience and adaptation of the caste system in Mauritius depended on such contrasting situations.

23   The caste identities of indentured labourers are hard to assess (Carter 1995: 95 *sq.*). Firstly, because the incomplete and inconsistent registers mix up caste names with sub-castes, family names, professions and geographical origins. British employees were not necessarily familiar with caste names, or were not very scrupulous when recording them. Secondly, because candidates for indentured labour adopted individual strategies. In spite of the common perception in Mauritius that caste members were passive Indian individuals ruled by an unescapable and oppressive system, caste status was heavily contested in 19th century India, as the chronic and violent inter-caste conflicts indicate (Servan-Schreiber 2001: 173).[23] We may assume that many indentured labourers took advantage of the system to start a new life with a higher status, either claiming to belong to a caste other than their own or laying claim to a status their caste members were not generally granted. Such individuals were sometimes mocked as 'Brahmins from the boat' (Singaravelou 1991: 16). We also know of reverse strategies (Carter 1995): some high-caste individuals preferred to hide their caste identity, fearing the planters would think them unfit for agricultural work or too prompt to federate the labourers because of their intellectual-elite status. The statistical surveys (Benedict 1961: 21, Carter 1995: 98, Tinker 1974: 55) show that almost all the castes were involved in emigration, and emigrants were roughly representative of the Indian population in terms of caste distribution, *i.e.* lower-caste individuals were in the majority.

Leaving India and crossing the black waters

24   The argument of the disappearance of caste has also been put forward by the descendants of indentured labourers involved in strategies of victimisation through which they portray themselves as individuals brutally uprooted from their soil and culture, just like African slaves. According to this narrative, crossing *kala pani* mirrors the Middle Passage endured by slaves taken from Africa, and the loss of identity resulting from indenturedness is equated to the social death experienced by African slaves (Patterson 1982). In order to nuance these arguments, one has to invalidate the 19th century discourse of Hindu nationalists who, pretending to assimilate India with the Hindu territory, long fought the very possibility that one could be a Hindu outside India (Van der Veer & Vertovec 1991: 152).

25   On the one hand, it is crucial not to assimilate 19th century rural India with a closed society, lacking any tradition of contact with outsiders or adaptive capacity. The Bhojpuri territory, where two-thirds of the indentured were from, is actually renowned for the historicity of its migrations (Servan-Schreiber 2010: 29 *sq.*), including river migrations and transoceanic migrations, even outside India (in Nepal or Burma). This contradicts the image of individuals whose identity would be inherently incompatible with leaving their native territory.[24]

26   On the other hand, Indologists Louis Renou and Jean Filliozat do indeed focus on the sea-voyage as a taboo (1985: 610), requiring an expiation ritual upon returning to India. When they returned home in 1904, the Mauritian wealthy Gujadhur family had to bathe in the Ganges and pay 2 lakhs rupees to the village *pancayat* in order to recover the Brahmin status they lost by 'crossing the seven seas' (Sarup-Gujadhur 2008: 56). But the Gujadhur did not first come to Mauritius as indentured labourers. This *kala pani* taboo refers to a Brahminical vision of castes and travelling, only shared by orthodox upper-echelon castes which rarely became indentured.[25] Assuming that the mere fact of leaving India or crossing the ocean are taboos structuring the experience of indenture, assuming they should stand at the core of caste analysis in Mauritius, means mistaking the 19th century Indian peasants' concerns with the intellectual and ritual constraints practised by the elites of the period.

27   Yet another argument linking departure from India with the disintegration of castes turns on the tradition of *depot marriages*, when indenture candidates married immediately before departure in order to meet the needs of planters, and recruiters' quotas for married couples. However, Carter (1995: 94) doubts such marriages had much of a real and lasting negative impact on endogamous traditions in terms of castes (but also of regional origins or languages).

28   Nevertheless, a scrupulous study of the conditions of indenture does indeed raise many questions. Migration was not the only concern; promiscuity and commensality on board ship while travelling to Mauritius were also major issues. A major part of the Hindu logic of purity and pollution hinges on rules and taboos regarding commensality. As a consequence of the supposed flouting of such rules on board and, later, during settlement in Mauritius, observers concluded castes had disappeared. And yet we know of members of higher castes who managed to preserve their purity by refusing to eat meals cooked on board, or by securing exemption from the most impure tasks (Carter 1995: 102, 122).

29   Note that indenture has probably been able to negotiate with caste rules much more easily than has been argued, given the flexible nature of the caste system, which has traditionally always been able to integrate exceptions (*apadharma*). The *Mahabharata* itself clearly accepts that, should a Brahmin need to do so in order to save his life, he may eat the meat of a dog he stole from an Untouchable (Herrenschmidt 1989: 221). In his famous novel *Lal Pasina* (*Sweating Blood*), the Mauritian author Unnuth writes about a similar period of distress during which high-caste indentured labourers were forced to eat fish: 'The poujari [priest] himself had declared that religion would not benefit from anyone dying' (2001: 393).

30   In addition, Mauritian narratives of indenture quite logically include systematic comparisons between indenture ships and pilgrim boats travelling to Jagannath. At this famous pilgrimage site, castes are said to disappear in the face of devotion, and purity issues are abrogated without any taboo being broken. In quite the same way, all the indentured are said to be 'brothers' on ship. But such a category of *jahaji bhai* ("brothers of the ship") should not be understood as a long-term alternative to caste (and religious) identity. Although these 'brothers' do seem to have indeed arranged marriages between their children for one generation, it is most unlikely that such endogamy endured or even unilaterally replaced, or meaningfully challenged, the caste criterion (Benoist 1989).

31   In conclusion, candidates for indenture should not be considered lonely and passive individuals subjected to an unavoidable loss of their identity and caste. Furthermore, the caste system, which does indeed play a structuring role, should not be considered incapable of adaptation and compromise, nor should it be seen as strictly incompatible with indenture.

Castes in Mauritius: from camp to village

32   Once settled in Mauritius in plantation 'camps' (places of residence),[26] the actual sharing of living and working conditions with non-Hindus was again perceived as insurmountable for the caste system, which was condemned to be wiped out by the highly rigorous socioracial hierarchy of the plantation system.[27] Hazareesingh (1973) and Benoist (1989) insisted that it was not until the first villages were founded at the end of the 19th century that the indentured were able to reproduce Indian social structures.

33   Yet, we learn from the recent Truth and Justice Commission survey that castes somehow endured, even within plantations. I argue that Mauritian Creoleness was born in these camps where all the indentured resided for many generations, at the heart of the sugarcane industry and the contacts between cultures it fostered. The narratives refer to contemporary Mauritius but, above all, they evoke memories of the 1940s-1960s, sometimes going back to the pivotal period of the early 20th century with reference to their parents or grand-parents, who comprised the first or second generation of settlers in Mauritius.

34   There is a lot of nostalgia expressed in these recollections: at first, the camp is often described as a peaceful and pleasant place where the community was very tight-knit, everyone was 'polite' and ready to give their neighbours a hand, where 'everybody was equal.' The content of many narratives, though, as well as countless anecdotes, contradict the image of casteless camps.

Outward signs of castes and professional specialisation

35   It is true enough that Mauritian daily life sometimes seems to ignore the Hindu criterion of purity. This probably explains why non-Hindu Mauritians are so ill-informed about castes. Here are a few telling anecdotes: devotees kissing each other on the cheeks when they meet under the temple hall, without giving any thought to the impure status of saliva.[28] Or the priest letting the Western anthropologist perform *arati* (offering of light) for the devotees. Or the occasional marriages between Hindus and non-Hindus. Let us also note that many outward signs of caste-belonging have been lost. The elders remember the shape and place of tattoos (*godna*) which used to be specific to a caste,[29] as was jewellery, especially wedding chains (a 'heart' or betel-leaf for higher castes, a 'ball' for others). Clothes were also caste-specific. Informants often mention the turbans (*pagree*) and the *dhoti*, which Chamar Untouchables could not wear below the knees. More generally, lower caste clothes are described as simple and charmless, in accordance with their supposed ignorance and backwardness (*jukaal*). Such information, however, indicates what has disappeared since the grand-parents' generation (end of the 19ᵗʰ century). The relative neutrality of jewellery and clothes in today's Mauritius would seem to relegate castes to a status of 'something of the past (*letan margoz*).'

36   Yet, the taboo concerning castes in Mauritius often interfered with the survey we conducted, itself named after the euphemistical *Social Stratification Project*, under the direct oversight of the Prime Minister's Office. Indeed, castes are considered 'reserved research areas' in Mauritius: studying them requires special accreditation.[30]

37   Obviously, the very existence of the taboo indicates the persistence of the system. During our survey, many individuals asked to remain anonymous, or for certain sentences to be deleted. We encountered no arguments in favour of suggesting there may be positive aspects to the caste system, such as solidarity within each caste, or the inter-caste agreement that the most vulnerable must be protected. However, the pride of belonging to a higher caste rapidly came up, such as in the case of this Ahir woman emphatically speaking about her 'Bengali' husband: 'Bengali is a very high caste, just like Brahmin' (*Bengali pli gran nasyon kouma maraz*).[31] Conversely, despite the general practice that a woman adopts her husband's caste, when the bride and groom's castes are different, the woman will retain her original caste if it is higher. Moreover, throughout the course of over one hundred interviews, only a few individuals said they didn't know their own *jati*, which systematically indicated they belonged to lower castes. On the contrary, all, whatever the caste, were deeply embarrassed when evoking lower castes.[32] This is true for family narratives: it takes a neighbour's intervention to 'remind' an interviewee that one of his daughters was married to a lower-caste individual. The very existence of lower castes is disturbing. The names of untouchable castes such as Chamar or Dusadh, and their practices such as pig rearing, are only evoked discretely (*sous-tapi*) and with aversion. Eyes down, one person spoke in a whisper about 'these people' (*sa boug-la*) eating 'these things' (*lotte zaffer*) and switched from Creole to Bhojpuri evoking '*hawe... ou kone, hawe, soowar*' (that... you know, that, pig) or using images ('*sa zaffer lake tourne*' [that with a corkscrew tail]) and euphemisms (*chawwna,* piglet). Their raising, sacrificing and eating pork would be the reason why Samajist Chamars were excluded from commensality and intermarriage with other Samajists, which eventually caused the group to split (Hollup 1994). Lower castes are also associated with negative

characteristics: the Chamar are dirty, alcoholic and quarrelsome. An undisciplined child is scolded: 'You act like a Chamar!' The dark complexion of lower castes is also noted,[33] as well as their way of talking: rude (*grossyer*) and aggressive (*batayer*). It is supposedly even 'impolite' to pronounce the word Chamar, which is why 'it is better to say Ravived.'

38   Along with school and among friends and acquaintances, the workplace is the main area where castes are systematically described as irrelevant in the camp context.[34] On the one hand, it has been argued that a kind of egalitarianism among the indentured has resulted from the planters' power and land monopoly (Ghasarian 1991: 32, Vignato 2006: 238). The supposed absence of spatial segregation and professional specialisation along caste lines is said to be a major characteristic of the camp. On the other hand, the British taxonomic obsession and 'divide-and-rule' strategies—having supposedly resulted in the 'invention' or fixation of the caste system in colonial India (Dirks 2001)—are said to have been abandoned in the plantations, which makes sense since castes were 'clearly not a necessary category for the control of indentured labour' (Van der Veer & Vertovec 1991: 155). In any case, the Mauritian survey has found no evidence of any manipulation of castes by planters aiming at social control of their workforce. The Whites (*bann blan*) do not know about 'these matters' (*bann zaffer*). While overseers (*sirdar*) were at first often (but not always) from higher castes, informants explain this was due to their ability to read and write, and not to their socio-religious status. All conversely stress that, since labourers have become literate, there are now many *sirdar* from lower castes.

39   The professional specialisation prototypically linked with castes does not automatically indicate (no more than it does in India) the actual profession of the individual. Yet, the links have partially persisted and, in Mauritius, everyone knows about the Ahir being cattle breeders and selling milk, the Chamars being cobblers and the Dhobis laundrymen. [35] Behind the specialisation associated with each caste, the whole hierarchy of the system according to the criterion of purity is revealed.

40   One major dimension of the caste system does seem to be missing in Mauritius, as it is never evoked locally: the *jajmani* system of exchange of goods and services (between landowning castes and landless ones), which was central to village life in India.[36] In Mauritius, such a logic has been replaced by a division of labour, and a hierarchy, based both on socio-professional categories (unskilled workers, in fields and factories; skilled artisans; staff) and on ethnic categories (Creoles, Indians, Whites) produced in the plantation context (Chazan & Ramhota 2009: 250 n. 9). The *sirdar* at the top of the socio-professional hierarchy will indeed be the ones patronising shrines on Mauritian plantations, rather than specific castes whose traditional function it is in India. As for conversions to Catholicism (mainly among the Tamils), they illustrate an upward socio-professional strategy coherent with the plantation context, rather than a will to free oneself from the caste system.[37] Despite this transition from castes to social classes, Mauritian 'Indians' continue to insist, as elsewhere, on their familiarity with the patron/client relationships inherent to the *jajmani* system. In the end, such familiarity results, according to some, in the Indians' ability to develop networks that give them close access to political power centres and, according to others, in their tendency to be docile and collaborative.

41   When the indentured left the camps, the housing pattern in the villages they founded tended to reproduce a spatial organisation along caste lines (Benoist 1989). It is likely that the temptation to rehabilitate Indian culture was closely related to socio-religious strategies of evolution, *via* more firmly asserted marriage preferences. An Ahir woman

remembered that her village hosted 'only Ahirs except a Chamar family and two Tamils' and, when we mentioned—without naming their caste—a Dusadh family living in the neighbouring village, she immediately established a link between neighbourhood and caste: 'oh yes, this is a lower caste place' (*ah wi sa place bann ti nation sa*). As for land purchase patterns, Allen even notes that 'it was not uncommon for persons of the same or comparable caste status to purchase land near one another in a specific locality' (1999: 167).

42   Somehow overstating a romantic and egalitarian image of the camp, elders do acknowledge this turn towards more ethnic and caste-based concerns in the transition from camp to village. They explain that settling in villages weakened the solidarity that went beyond caste, which was the rule in the camp. Yet in many ways, plantation camps were already Indian villages, in which the indentured took the place of African slaves rather than actually sharing their daily lives. As a matter of fact, as early as 1846, Indians account for 96% of the sugarcane workforce in Mauritius (and 85% of the total agricultural workforce—Allen 1999: 59). A minority of slave descendants has remained in the plantation milieu, but as 'semi-labourers' or artisans, and they have been grouped in separate camps.[38]

Endogamy and commensality

43   The holistic nature of the caste system is often invoked to support the claim that it is impossible for it to be replicated in Mauritius where not all components are present, especially because of the (relative) absence of Brahmins in the Mauritian context. Such arguments overemphasise the role of Brahmins in the religious life of 19th century Bhojpuri peasants, and underestimate the central role of popular religion specialists, who could well be peasants and Untouchables. It is also useful to stress that, among other conditions of migration, the plantation society milieu was not unknown to Bhojpuri peasants, be it that of sugarcane plantations in Bihar or tea plantations in Assam. In this sense, the adjustments needed when plantation workers resettled in Mauritian camps may have been less radical than it is often argued.

44   Contesting the narrative of indenture as a way to become emancipated from the caste system, or as comparable to slavery, Carter (1995) demonstrates the central role of returnees, those Indian intermediaries (often *sirdar*) commissioned by the planters to go back to India and contract new gangs of labourers. Unsurprisingly, the recruiting strategies of these returnees relied on family, locality and caste networks, again invalidating the image of lonely indentured labourers cut off from their sociological and community references.

45   Of course, not all castes were in the same situation. The Ahir, Chamar and Dusadh, for instance, were well represented numerically, making it possible for them to respect endogamy and strengthen their caste identity.[39] Other castes with fewer members were probably compelled to renegotiate their marriage strategies and their status in the overall hierarchy.

46   As a matter of fact, there *are* exceptions to caste endogamy, but it nonetheless remains the preferred marriage strategy for Hindu Mauritians. During the time of the plantations, official match-makers (*agwa*, a Bhojpuri term that passed into the Creole language) made sure that couples belonged to compatible castes. But even today, several informants, who seemed at first glance little concerned with caste matters, explained that all their siblings

and children married within their own caste. Those individuals who purport not to know about their *jati* argue it is a woman's matter and, more precisely, a concern for mothers and mothers-in-law who worry about it when it comes to marriage. 'Casteism, this is for marriage,' as an old Vaish woman puts it: 'they say you should not give your daughter to lower castes' (*zot dire pa pou done tifi dan ti nation*).[40]

47 Such respect of the principle of endogamy prevents us from affirming that the preservation of castes in Mauritius is limited to the general 'high castes'/'low castes' differentiation, or to the Brahminical category of *varna.* This idea, which is pervasive in the bibliography about castes outside of India (Bass 2012: 31, Hollup 1994, Chazan & Ramhota 2009: 157 n. 18), echoes numerous local discourses. Yet, it cannot account for the fact that the largest caste groups, such as the Ahir, Koiri, Kurmi, Dusadh or Chamar, still favour *jati* endogamy.

48 Vertovec quotes matters of bathing and sharing a bottle or a glass as the 'subtlest aspects of Indo-Caribbean culture, clearly of Indian origin' (2000: 118). Closer to Mauritius, Ghasarian adds the obsession with non-contact, the recurrence of purifying fasting and the reluctance to play animal-skinned drums as foundational for Indian culture on the island of Réunion (1991: 79). We know of Tamilnad Untouchables refusing to carry on with their socio-religious role of drum-players during funerals (Clark-Décès 2008). The fact that similar debates occur among labourers in Sri Lanka (Bass 2012: 158) or Sumatra (Vignato 2006) plantations contradicts the idea that indenture eliminates the Untouchable stigma.

49 As such typical markers of the Hindu ideology of purity and the transmission of pollution are acknowledged, and considered valid in Mauritius, the preservation of commensality rules comes as no surprise. In plantation camps, river water is shared by all, and all use the same well… 'but not the same *lota* (pot)!' And the interviewees are unanimously aware that higher-caste individuals would accept neither food nor water from lower-caste co-workers. As an Ahir woman puts it: 'I had friends among all castes, but it was forbidden to go and eat at their home, or to enter their home.' She remembers that, during a lower-caste wedding to which a higher-caste individual was invited, the latter only 'offered a gift, without eating or drinking.' Conversely, during higher-caste weddings, food was carefully prepared by high-status members only and, when lower castes were invited, they were served last, and kept apart. Watchmen were specifically assigned the task of verifying that these rules were followed.

50 Such information stresses the preservation of purity as a major dimension in the daily life of plantation camps. Several informants were even aware of more complex elaborations of the Hindu ideology, such as the *pacca/kaccha* (raw/cooked) duality.

51 'Love marriages' are, of course, more and more common[41] but, if they ever transgress caste endogamy rules, they are looked down upon and raise pragmatic issues. Everyone has stories about family tensions and suicides resulting from love matches that went against the parents' wishes with regard to castes. There are numerous accounts of in-laws refusing to eat at their daughter-in-law's home, or even any food prepared by her. The danger of ostracism tied to caste exogamy remains a widespread fear, even in today's Mauritius. A 40-year-old woman, who attended the interview of her Ahir father, during which he spoke of his marriage with a lower caste (Rajbhar) woman, asked him: 'after, your caste was dead?' (*ou jaat finn mort?*)

52 The most violent examples of caste discrimination are often mentioned as things of the past, whether such violence was symbolic or physical (a lower-caste individual beaten for unduly entering a shrine). True enough, no one really cares anymore about socialising in public with lower-caste members. But, just as in India, castes still regulate private matters and the changes that have taken place should not completely overshadow the perennial logic. One older, high-caste man, for example, 'did not even talk to lower castes.' Although he had indeed 'got used, now, to talk and sit with them,' he 'will still hesitate sharing their meal.' No clearer clue could ever be found underscoring the resilience of purity as a key criterion in the preservation of status hierarchy.

Caste, prestige, power and devotion

53 In actuality, the evolution of castes in Mauritius remains highly equivocal. This is particularly the case with regard to devotion.

54 In most camps (Union Vale, Trois-Boutiques, Chemin-Grenier), all castes joined the same *kalimai* ('plantation shrine'), each individual coming there to pray to his/her god(dess) under the name he/she preferred. However, informants have specified that prayers (*priyer*) varied: for *Baharia puja*, one of the major ceremonies in such shrines, the Babujee-Maraz would not perform any sacrifice, the Vaish would sacrifice goats and the Shudra, pigs. An older labourer-woman from Union Vale camp also remembers that, in her youth (in the 1930s-40s), the order for distributing *prasad* ('sanctified offerings') followed caste hierarchy. Since then, the proliferation of *kalimai*, included inside each camp (such as in Beau-Fond, L'Escalier or Mon Désert-Mon Trésor), has caused or accompanied the split of shrines into *grand-* and *ti- nasyon*: there was 'a *kalimai* for the Vaish and one for the Chamar.'[42]

55 Furthermore, most *kalimai* were 'self-service' shrines with no officiating priests and a divine image directly accessible to all. Each individual came and offered her/his devotion according to her/his knowledge, finances and family traditions or personal preferences. Devotion was mainly a women's matter. For the past two decades, the increased institutionalisation of Mauritian Hindu shrines has seen such *kalimai* replaced by monumental temples managed by male associations, with dedicated priests and affiliation with a national Federation, which stipulates precise procedures (prescribed ritual language, choice of divinities).

56 Until recently, temples were often associated with certain castes. The president of a Tamil temple-managing society explains: 'this temple was known as high-caste. I don't know but people used to say that. Higher castes could not go to other *kovil* ('Tamil temple'), and vice-versa. They were allowed to but they said they were not feeling welcomed. I'm speaking about forty-fifty years ago, and until the 1980s-1990s.'

57 Nowadays, the prestige associated with renovated temples, together with priests coming from India and the yearning for more orthodoxy, have changed the game (Claveyrolas 2014). The need to bring together all available patrons has also initiated huge temple projects to foster multi-caste alliances, in Mauritius as elsewhere (Clothey 2006: 76 for Singapore, for instance). Furthermore, in renovated temples, the spatial organisation restricts access to the divine image to the priest alone, thus preserving it from pollution by the devotees. Such issues do stress hierarchy according to purity in devotional

matters, but have been balanced out by the universalising ideology of these new temples and gods, supposedly open to answering prayers from any devotee, regardless of caste.[43]

58 The evolution of castes is, in the end, a matter of prestige. The absence of an official and permanent hierarchy allows for individual and collective negotiations. Hence, a woman from an Ahir family from Union Vale can claim she belongs to a 'Maraz sub-caste.' Individuals are also prone to add to their family name a prestigious suffix referring to a *varna*, which is not always legitimately theirs: Singh or Varma claiming a Babujee status, Sharma or Chowbey claiming to be Maraz. Another example of the struggle surrounding caste matters in order to attain prestige comes from the history of the Sanatan Dharma movement. Contesting the ritual monopoly of Brahmins, the Vaish had Indian Brahmins come to Mauritius and initiate them into the priesthood. As a consequence, the Hindu Mahasabha split: controlled by the Brahmins since its foundation in 1925 and excluding lower castes, it was taken over by the Vaish in 1985. Just as in India, Mauritian lower castes often choose the path of sanskritisation (Srinivas 1995: 1-48), using the caste system's potential for social ascension rather than trying to get free from it. The Chamar Untouchables have become the Ravived, and the Dusadh the Rajput (a Kshatriya category), by founding in 1965 the Gahlot Rajput Maha Sabha—which has existed in India since 1923 (Servan-Schreiber 2010: 36). Again as in India, this terminological transformation, which can even be accompanied by the adoption of higher-caste practices (vegetarianism, discontinuation of bloody sacrifices), has little effect on the actual hierarchy. Finally, we must stress that when it comes to making use of the caste system's potential for upward mobility, the 'Vaish' community has been the most successful. Their majority position in Mauritius is probably the result of the recent accession of numerous lower-caste individuals and groups (which constitute the majority among the indentured) to this prestigious *varna*.

Between Creoleness and Indianness

59 On the one hand, and contrary to what both local discourses and the literature have to say, the Hindu caste system, its structure and ideology, is relevant in Mauritius. Moreover, this system is certainly not cut off from the socio-religious logic that prevails in the Indian system, nor is it limited to the skeleton of *varna*. Still today, *jati* govern, at least as an ideal rule, the prescriptions for marriage, commensality, residence, access to homes and temples, types of sacrifice and even professional specialisation. As a consequence, far from the idea of a 'disintegration of caste,' one has to acknowledge the relevance of the ideological criterion of ritual pollution as foundational for the Mauritian caste system.

60 Of course, indenture resulted in major adjustments to the ideal mode of functioning of the caste system, which has had to adapt to more diverse situations according to family histories. Obviously, castes have also evolved with the establishment of social classes and the growing urbanisation and globalisation processes. As for the enhancement of power stakes and status claims via permanent lobbying, this is hardly specific to Mauritius. Analysing an Orissa village in the late 1970s, Mitra (1982) showed how electoral allegiance strategies shifted from vertical solidarity (grouping high-caste patrons and low-caste clients) to horizontal solidarity (grouping castes of similar status). One should not be led astray by Mauritian discourse that purports to consider Indian castes a feudal and inflexible structure. In Mauritius as in India, hierarchy along purity lines, which is

foundational for the system, persists. But is it not precisely because of this hierarchy, which is indeed structuring and omnipresent but also flexible, that the system endures in India itself? Is this not the very secret of its resilience?[44]

61 On the other hand, one should insist on the specificities of the Mauritian context in order to give castes their proper dimensions and evolution processes. As is the case in Trinidad (Vertovec 2000: 122), the 'disappearance' of castes is touted as an indication of a modern and liberal Hinduism that only non-Indian Hindus have proved able to promote. According to Hindu activists, the recurrent resurgence of caste issues in the local media is merely the result of manipulation by non-Hindus aiming to criticise and divide the Hindo-Mauritian community. Differentiating between the various castes could indeed lead to contesting the general idea of a Hindu 'majority' in Mauritius, or even of a Vaish majority which underlies the fragile balance of Mauritian identities. Hence the head of the main federation of Bhojpuri temples argues: 'one mustn't forget this past wound which had divided the Hindu community in various castes. This is why I burnt this newspaper. I was outraged to see it had published the distribution of various castes in the Hindu community. It is not fair that people go on dividing the Hindu community in castes' (*Défimédia*, 24 June 2011). And Sarita Boodhoo, a Bhojpuri activist, points out the endogamous social stratifications of other Mauritian communities (the 'grands Blancs', the Hakka Chinese, the Surti Muslims, etc.), lamenting the fact that only Hindu castes are stigmatised (interview, 20 August 2010).

62 Moreover, castes are denounced today as a recent invention of unscrupulous Hindu politicians wishing to mobilise caste networks as a basis for vote-catching strategies. The aim is both to federate this or that caste group beyond social-class differences and to use castes as a means to activate a criterion of differentiation in relation to Mauritian non-Hindus. The result is a kind of ethnicisation of castes, already witnessed on the island of Réunion[45] (or in Sri Lanka[46]) and in India.[47]

63 In this article, while I have reassessed castes as they exist in India, I tried not to artificially consider the Mauritian context a mere backdrop onto which castes are simply transposed. In reality, the reassertion of caste divisions in Mauritius must be considered in the context of a multicultural society that is adjusting to the rapid evolution of other categories as well (geographic origin, language, religion, social class). As a kind of mirror image of the Indian case, where Christians and Muslims are partly integrated in the caste system,[48] not all Mauritian communities are concerned with castes. Creole descendants of slaves, Franco-Mauritians and Sino-Mauritians (*i.e.* one-third of the Mauritian population) are only familiar with castes insofar as they are instrumentalised for political and electoral purposes. I would stress that the sketchy knowledge Mauritians have of the Indian caste system weakens the possibility that Mauritian Hindus will be very strongly affected by current Indian political mobilisations and debates surrounding the issue of caste. This could indeed account for a weakening of caste ideology and structure in Mauritius, or pave the way for a 'Mauritianisation' of the system. But so far, it has certainly not resulted in the disappearance of the system. The Mauritian situation also leaves the door open to a possible hardening of castes as markers and protectors of an ethnic identity which is perceived as threatened.

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NOTES

1. I supervised a research team on castes in Mauritius under the aegis of the *Truth and Justice Commission* mandated by the Mauritian government. The official goal of the *Truth and Justice Commission Act* (22 August 2008) was to 'assess the consequences of slavery and indenture during the colonial period and until today' in a spirit of national reconciliation. The recommendations of the report, published in 2011, focus on recognising the discrimination that slave descendants still endure in Mauritius today. I thank Vijaya Teelock who entrusted me with this survey, and Alvina

Gopaulen, Smita Gya, Vikram Mugon and Dreesha Teelwah, all efficient and enthusiastic collaborators.

2. Over 100 interviews were conducted, generally at the interviewee's home, most of them from June to November 2010. Interviewers favoured the language usually used by informants, be it Bhojpuri or Creole. As is common in everyday Mauritian speech, most interviewees frequently used Bhojpuri words in Creole sentences, or vice-versa.

3. I understand 'plantation society' as a society centred on a monoculture meant for export only, and dependent on a cheap, imported, labour-force, residing on the plantation.

4. Among others, the first Prime Minister of Independent Mauritius, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam (father of the present-day Prime Minister) was a member of this caste.

5. For obvious reasons, linked both to the arbitrary categorisation of individuals and to the local temptations to co-opt these categories for identity construction or to attract votes (Christopher 1992), I only give rough estimates. According to the 2011 Central Statistics Office, 48% of all Mauritians declare Hinduism as their religion, as compared to 17% declaring Islam (also with Indian origins) and 33% declaring themselves to be Christians.

6. The Catholic priest Roger Cerveaux first coined the expression *malaise créole* in 1993.

7. The *Population générale* ('General Population') census category groups descendants of slaves and Franco-Mauritian planters. The other main official category, 'Indo-Mauritian,' is not readily useful and even deceptive, over-estimating the links with India as well as masking the internal heterogeneity (in terms of castes, regional origins, languages, religions but also social classes).

8. Hence the centrality of caste endogamy in India. But the rule is all the more valid outside castes. As Ghasarian notes for the island of Réunion: 'All mixing, starting with ethnic *métissage*, is associated with impurity' (1991: 79).

9. No official quotas exist in Mauritius, but sub-community pressure groups (based on caste, religious or ethnic lines) regularly contest and demand better representation of their community, threatening those in power to ask their members not to vote for them.

10. The Ravidassia terminology preferred outside Mauritius is very seldom used.

11. I thank the anonymous reviewer of the first version of this paper who, among other useful comments, stressed this argument.

12. The two groups are often merged in Babujee-Maraz. *Maraz* being the creolisation of *Maharaja* ("Great king"), we note the paradox (known in India) of Brahmins designated under a terminology referring to Kshatriyas.

13. *Nasyon* is, in the Creole language, a polysemic term referring more to the ethnic community than to the Mauritian nation. The motto of *Mauricianisme*, *enn sel lepep enn sel nasyon* ('one people, one nation') has never managed to popularise the idea of Mauritius as a 'nation' (Eriksen 1994).

14. The castes are then known as *jaat* and the caste system as *jaat-paat* or *castéisme* (casteism).

15. Khatri is spelt with an 'h' in India and without in Mauritius.

16. Indian linguistic and cultural minorities in relation to Hindu caste populations, living mostly in the highlands or drylands and employed by the colonial power as a labour force. Most tribal populations are associated with lower-caste identities.

17. The term 'Untouchable' refers to the lowest category in the *varna* caste hierarchy. They are considered *a-varna* (without *varna*), but are divided into many different and hierarchised *jati*.

18. Most of all among the Telugus who are organised according to their own lineages: Telgalolou ('oil makers'), Naaggotu, Campolou, Reidcolou, Markande, Salolou, Navdekta.

19. The Creole word *kalite* ('quality') refers to the ethnic identity of an individual, and is reminiscent of Hindu conceptions of *varna*.

20. Maraz also refers to priesthood and not to status. So funeral specialists, notwithstanding their association with lower castes, are called Katha Maraz.

21. Often under the same terminology of 'disintegration' (Grieco 1998, Jayawardena 1971).

22. Because there are diverse types of Hindu diasporas, and because it is not appropriate to call Mauritian Hindus a 'diaspora,' I believe that studying Mauritian Hinduism within the 'diaspora' category and analytical framework is misleading. Consequently, this paper focuses on the local apprehension of castes rather than on a thorough discussion of the literature on castes in diaspora.

23. Recent works confirm that such violence cannot be considered a thing of the past in India. Olivier Herrenschmidt (2014) analyses how Shudra castes, from oppressed groups, have come to power, sometimes accessing it through persistent violence against Dalits, for instance.

24. Tamils were also present in Mauritius before indenture (since the mid-18th century), where they formed a community of artisans and traders.

25. After very intense debates surrounding the Bengali Sea-Voyage Movement, Indian orthodox elites have articulated strategies to bypass such taboos, and enable people to go and study in London or fight with Sepoy regiments overseas. The Jaipur Maharaja Madhosingh II precisely laid out all details (a special ship, Ganga water, etc.) of his trip when he was summoned to London in 1902 for Edward VII's coronation (Clémentin-Ojha 2011).

26. Each camp—the very places where slaves resided—counted a dozen basic buildings, originally made of mud and straw, and each hosting ten families. There are generations of labourers who spent their whole lives between the sugarcane fields and these virtually self-sufficient camps (which included shrines, a meeting hall, a dispensary, a shop).

27. We need only mention the ethnic distribution of space in Mauritius (towns for Creoles, villages for Indians, urbanised central hills and seafront for the Whites) to stress how much hierarchy is still visible between the descendants of White planters, those of African slaves and those of Indian indentured labourers in Mauritius today (Claveyrolas 2010).

28. Ghasarian notes the replacement of the traditional salute (joined palms, without contact with others) by the handshake (1991: 37).

29. A *tika*–like tattoo on the forehead for the Junglee, a *godna* on the arm for higher castes, one near the eyes for the Bengali...

30. Several books, even ones containing only brief references to castes in Mauritius, have been withdrawn from bookshops and libraries. If some reluctance has been noted at the institutional level (access to indenture registers mentioning castes), our survey itself (selection of thematic; methodology and fieldwork; analyses and conclusions) was not subjected to any kind of pressure or censorship.

31. Interviews were carried out in Creole and (creolised) Bhojpuri.

32. Including when interviewers were Bhojpuri Mauritians.

33. We still need further studies linking such a criterion (existing in India) and the racist basis of the plantation society. The best discussion of race, caste and skin colour was conducted in Trinidad (a context comparable to Mauritius) by Aisha Khan (2004).

34. The case of *baitka* (Hindu educational and community centres present in the plantations) is more ambiguous. Some recall castes as irrelevant; others contend this was only true for Vedic *baitka*, affiliated with the Arya Samaj, as opposed to Puranic *baitka* affiliated with the Sanata Dharma.

35. Other quoted examples: the Kurmi are market gardeners, the Koiri cultivate saffron, the Kahar are potters, the Halwai make sweets, the Lohar are blacksmiths, the Noniya make salt, the Dom are basket weavers, the Nai are barbers.

36. I focus on the fact that such a system is absent from Mauritian discourses, in spite of of the scholarly debate on the essentialisation or invention of *jajmani* in the British colonial period (Mayer 1993).

37. Benoist (1979: 132) even compares the conversion of Indians living on the island of Réunion with sanskritisation operations among lower castes in India.

38. Even before indenture, free Indians lived in separate spaces (the *Camp des Malbars*, in Port-Louis). The 'biological' and even residential *métissage* has rarely been the norm. But one will find clear evidence of cultural *métissage* in the history of the Creole language, for instance, which was rapidly adopted as a common language.

39. While the initial imbalanced sex ratio must have hampered endogamy, a 40% ratio of women was imposed on recruiters as early as 1868 (Carsignol 2011: 21).

40. Several informants note that the obligation to marry one's child to a member of a 'good' caste is more crucial for daughters than for sons. Another parallel with the Indian situation: higher-caste widows always end up with lower caste husbands when they remarry (a Bengali woman married 'in' Ahir and remarried 'in' Nonia).

41. As the informants put it, there are, then, only two castes (*jaat*): that of women and that of men.

42. See also Chazan & Ramhota (2009: 344-346). Such a differentiation process is also relevant for the Tamil community. The St-Julien d'Hotman village, counting two renovated Tamil temples, one *ti nasyon* and one *grand nasyon,* one hundred meters apart and dedicated to the same god (Muruga), is locally renowned and documented (Chazan & Ramhota 2009: 266 *sq.*).

43. For a discussion of the evolution of Hinduism and its temples in India, see Tarabout (1997) and, for a synthesis, Fuller (1992).

44. Jaffrelot (2013: 30) sums up the Indian contemporary situation: 'In the past century-and-a-half, castes have evolved a lot. They are not pieces of an overarching vertical social system anymore: they now exist in their own right. Closer to interest groups holding specific values — no longer aligned on the Brahmins' values —.and given corporate defence associations or even political parties [...]. But although the caste system has been so radically transformed, castes remain one of the basic unifying force in Indian life, as proven by the importance families still grant to *jati* endogamy or—a new but relative degree of freedom—to *varna* endogamy.'

45. Where 'the ethnic distinction replaces that based on caste' (Benoist 1979: 132).

46. 'Ethnicity came to supplant caste and class among Tamil tea estate workers as the primary foundation for individual and group identifications' (Bass 2012: 10).

47. But the debate concerning the lesser influence of castes as a vertically hierarchized system is far from settled among Indianist scholars.

48. See Assayag (1995) for a discussion of South Indian Muslims based on ethnography, and Clémentin-Ojha (2008) for an overview of Indian Christians, both including caste matters.

ABSTRACTS

Mauritius has been an independent nation since 1968. It was founded on the history and structures of a plantation society and is mainly inhabited by descendants of Indian (and Hindu) indentured labourers. The question of the caste system's 'transfer' or disappearance among Hindu Mauritians is both locally taboo and crucial to our understanding of Mauritian realities, taking us deep inside the local interactions between Creoleness and Indianness. A survey conducted among older generations of Indian labourers having lived (and still living) in plantation camps overturns the common perception that the caste system among Hindu Mauritians has disappeared, or lost its ideological relevance.

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