

From the Editor and Publisher's Desk

The idea of a Special Publication on Reunion Island had been brewing in my mind for quite some time. For many years I observed that Reunion Island would send a strong delegation to attend the annual Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD). In fact, in January 2012, at the PBD in Jaipur, a nearly 40-strong delegation will be there.

Also, every year I would witness the delegation members get somewhat drowned out and even marginalized in the big show where large numbers of English-speaking Overseas Indians would flood the halls, and occupy the dais. Being Francophone, most members of the Reunion team have found it difficult to put across their point of view at the PBD where hardly any Government or Media person speaks French. They come with hope and expectations, and yet, year after year, they return with hardly much chance to voice their concerns. And that is why I thought the French-speaking diaspora needs special attention.

Not that I speak French. But I understood that the voice of Reunion needed to be heard. One way for me was to publish a magazine, after talking to many people across the island. One-third of the 800,000 plus people of Reunion Island are of Indian descent, the majority from various parts of Tamil Nadu. They follow Tamil traditions and customs with a deep sense of belonging to their motherland. Yet, they are French, because that is what their passports say. Their aspirations for getting a PIO card get stymied each year, because the Government insists on documentation.

A way needs to be found to circumvent the documentation issue, the matter needs to be examined in spirit and not just by exact letters. The majority lost their emigration documents because there were no systems of preserving them. In some instances, they were destroyed by the colonial agents who arranged for transportation of south Indian indentured workers to Reunion Island. This was done to prevent them from returning home. At the time when the Indians were taken as indentured workers, there were vast communication gaps as well—the estate owners were French speaking, while the Indians knew hardly any word of French, barring few who may have been from Pondicherry. Over five to six generations, the documentation suffered badly. The point is: Should a piece of paper now come in the way of the people of Reunion Island from being recognized as People of Indian Origin? Do they really need to prove their Indian-ness?

In any case, the Government of India has recognized with a Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award, Mr Jean Paul Virapouille, a former Senator from Reunion Island. The PBSA is awarded to those overseas Indians who have done distinguished service for the Indian community. If these awards can be conferred, then surely a way can be found to grant PIO cards to the Indians of Reunion Island.

The PIO card will open doors of economical, cultural and commercial exchanges between the people of Reunion Island and India and that is what India's engagement with Overseas Indians is all about.

A special thanks to the team members of Reunion Chapter of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) who made my visit possible. My thanks in particular to GOPIO Reunion President Mr Paul Canaguy and his wife Mrs Antoinette Canaguy, Mr Jean Regis Ramsamy, Mrs Jasmine Amogom-Poule and Mr Gilbert Canabady.

I mentioned before that I do not speak French. And, therefore, I must thank my two able translators who moved with me throughout my stay in Reunion Island—Dr Yannick Korpel and Luigi.

I hope this issue will give you all an insight and perspective on the Indian element in Reunion Island. Truly, it is a beautiful volcanic island, set in the southern Indian Ocean, just waiting to be explored!

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