ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an insight on the consolidation of the nation building in multi-ethnic Mauritius. This paper aims at explaining the factors that lead to ethnic tensions and ethnic conflicts in multi-ethnic Mauritius and also discussing the importance of certain pre-requisites like equal opportunity and good governance for the consolidation of nation building.

Design/methodology/approach – In this paper, use of mainly secondary data and observation has been made for reflection, analysis and discussion. Research methods used include document analysis, internet search and observation, amongst others.

Findings – The principal findings of this research indicate that the majority of the population is for the construction and consolidation of a Mauritian nation and most people have high expectation from state leaders to work efficiently and effectively for the sake of the motherland. It is generally believed that good governance on the part of all major societal stakeholders is a sine qua non for nation building and its consolidation.

Research implications – This paper has much relevance in the fast developing Mauritian society as it may help the authority at reviewing its strategies regarding the management of the multi-ethnic society with the main purpose of consolidating its nation building.

Originality/Value – The results of this study will be helpful to policy makers in multi-ethnic societies in Africa and other parts of the world to understand the importance of the inclusion of good governance and transparency in all the development process so that social justice prevails thereby consolidating nation building.

Keywords: Multi-ethnic society, Ethnic tensions and conflict, Consolidation of nation building, Good governance, Equal opportunity.

Introduction

Mauritius is normally known as the rainbow nation. Tourists and visitors consider the island, set in its turquoise sea, as an oasis of peace and tranquility in the Indian Ocean. Since its independence in 1968, the country has made enormous progress as far as economic development is concerned. Politicians have often called the population to join hands and work for the socio economic development of the country. During the last three decades, the average rate of economic growth has varied between 4 to 5 percent on an average which is a clear cut example of the sacrifice made by the inhabitants for the sake of the country.

However, the consolidation of the Mauritian Nation has not been completely realized. Several attempts have been made to construct the ‘mauritianess’ but it did not fully succeed. Many people are of opinion that much attention and resources have been channeled to cause economic growth thus neglecting the social development. Some people still put their ethnic identities before their national ones and they consider themselves to be Hindus, Muslims or Christians first and then Mauritians.

However, the high level of tolerance, mutual understanding and effective social interaction among the four main communities namely Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Chinese in the country give much hope that the country possesses all the necessary basic requirements that can be fully exploited in its attempt to build and sustain the Mauritian nation, where everyone would proudly claim the Mauritian identity. Therefore, the main stakeholders of the state should work in close collaboration for the promotion and construction of a true Mauritian society. High priority which has since recently been given to good governance in all areas of development should be consolidated and sustained. Transparency and social justice should become part and parcel in the development process so that no community feels being neglected and left outside the mainstream of development.

The aim of this paper is to explain the factors that lead to ethnic tensions and conflicts in the multi-ethnic Mauritian society. The paper also discusses the importance of certain pre-requisites like equal opportunity and good governance for the consolidation of nation building.

The first part of this paper provides a historical overview of the Mauritian society and the conceptualisation of nation building. Then, follows an explanation on ethnic tensions and ethnic conflict. This second part deals with the institutional and constitutional arrangements made for the sake of nation building. In this part, I will discuss the importance of certain necessary pre-requisites for consolidation of the nation building. Finally, a conclusion based on the paper will be stated.

Methodology

Methodology is the systematic and scientific way of producing and analyzing data so that theories can be tested, accepted or rejected (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000).
other words, it simply means a plan that describes how, when and where data are to be collected and analysed (Parahoo, 1997). For the purpose of this paper, use of secondary data and observation of functioning of the society have been made for the sake of reflection, analysis and discussion. Although the methodology used seems to have its limitations yet it helps tremendously to give a surface picture of the necessary ingredients that account for the consolidation of nation building in a multi-ethnic society. Further in-depth studies, using a combination of various methods, on the theme would no doubt lead to a better conclusion.

Literature Review and Analysis

Historical Overview of the Multi-ethnic Mauritian Society

Mauritius is a multi-ethnic society. The four main communities in Mauritius, based on the 1972 census, are Hindus 52%, General Population 30%, Muslims 17% and Chinese 3%. It is important to note that none of these groups has a homogeneous population. For instance, the Hindu community comprises various ethnic groups like Baboojee-Maraz, Vaish, Rajput, Ravived, Telegu, Tamil and Marathi, amongst others. The cultural rites and rituals, traditional norms, beliefs and values of the various groups differ depending on whether they are sanatanists, arya samadists or any other. In the Muslim Community, we find the Sunnites, Shiites and Ahmadists who are followers of the Islam religion. The General Population community consists of creoles (mainly the black and Coloured) and Franco Mauritians amongst others. The Chinese Community comprises the speakers of Cantonese and of Hakka (Eriksen, 1993).

Successive governments, since independence, have regularly called the four main communities to work together for the purpose of economic development. However, some members of the different communities are of opinion that they have not reaped the benefits of development and that their standard of living and quality of lives have barely improved during the past decades. Although no one can deny the fact the Mauritius has made its way, slowly but surely, regarding economic progress and its limitations yet it helps tremendously to give a surface picture of the necessary ingredients that account for the consolidation of nation building in a multi-ethnic society. Further in-depth studies, using a combination of various methods, on the theme would no doubt lead to a better conclusion.

Nation Building and its consolidation

The process of constructing, creating or structuring a national identity using the power of the state is often regarded as nation building (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation-building). The state can embark on major socio-economic projects and involve the population with a view to foster social solidarity, cooperation and economic growth. The goal is to bring people from different groups together and develop a sense of belonging and patriotism. Much emphasis is laid by the state on common symbols and values shared by the population. In Mauritius, people attach much importance to symbols like the national anthem and the national flag. On independence day, the 12th March, people forget their ethnic differences and celebrate the festival as true patriots. National flags are seen floating in front of all houses and commercial buildings. On such occasion, everyone claims to hold the Mauritian national identity. The national anthem is chanted by one and all. Unfortunately, such moment is temporary. Once the festival is over, some people return to their ethnic cocoons.

Nation building also refers to the efforts made by the state to increase its capacities for self-rule and sustainable economic development (mni.arizona.edu/whoweare/whatisphp). It requires the setting up of democratic institutions at all levels of the society where everyone gets the opportunity to voice his or her opinion without fear and consequently, participate fully in building a just and fair society. Consolidation of nation building involves developing the nation's capacity to effectively make and take effective decisions and implement same rationally for the benefit of everyone. It involves a comprehensive effort to engage in good governance in all the sectors. Transparency and accountability on the part of all major stakeholders responsible to govern become a must to build a nation that works.

Stephenson. C (2005) argues that to understand the concept of nation-building, one needs to have some definitions of what a nation is. According to her, early conceptions of nation defined it as a group or race of people who shared history, traditions, and culture, sometimes religion, and usually language. Dahal. R (2008) also claims that a nation is regarded as a community of people who share a common ethnic origin, culture, historical tradition and language. These definitions make one think of a nation just like an ethnic group or an ethnic nation, based on the social construction of race or ethnicity. On the other hand, Dahal also argues that a nation refers to a group of people united by a common interest and the ideology of nationalism, which is above ethnic, caste or class determination. Here the notion of nation lays emphasis on the merger of the people from different ethnic groups and communities of various cultures within the political community organised as a state. This concept of a nation is quite similar to what Stephenson argues when she considers a nation as a civic nation, based on common identity and loyalty to a set of political ideas and institutions, and the linkage of citizenship to nationality. She adds that the people of a nation generally share a common national identity, and part of nation-building is the building of that common identity. In this paper, whenever reference will be made to nation it will be according to these latter definitions of both authors. This is so because the idea of consolidating nation building in Mauritius has as a major aim the creation of a common platform with shared common values where people of different groups can be brought together to cooperate, collaborate and work for the socio-economic development of the motherland and where
Ethnic Tensions and conflicts in multi-ethnic Mauritius

The population in any country is composed of various ethnic groups. Given the presence of different groups in a country, ethnic tensions and conflicts are bound to occur. Some societies are able to manage ethnic tensions effectively and succeed in preventing them from degenerating into ethnic conflicts and violence which often cause much harm to the socio-economic and political fabrics. The recent bloody ethnic and violence in Iraq, England and France clearly demonstrate the damage caused to the societies.

In Mauritius, the 1968 riots, where large scale violence broke up between the Creole and Muslim communities in the capital city of Port- Louis, resulted into loss of many lives, hundreds of people wounded and thousands of houses and commercial buildings damaged. Following the riots, political and socio-religious leaders worked collaboratively with other civil society groups to take positive steps so as to bring people of different communities together to work and live peacefully. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Mauritian state successfully united members of the various communities and the ethnic concern nearly lost its importance in the public arena. The population was able to develop a sense of ‘mauritianess’ and people were responding to the state as Mauritians. Everyone joined hands to work hard for the sake of socio-economic development and welfare of the country.

The country started to take off in the midst 1980s and large amount of progress was achieved. Unfortunately, the state stakeholders, mainly the politicians and the capitalist entrepreneurs failed to distribute the benefits of the economic gains in a just and fair manner to the population. There was an unequal redistribution of wealth and income which led to a few becoming very rich and the majority of the population falling under the poverty trap. As early as 1990s, people from the lower classes, and even those from the middle classes, were getting much difficulties to meet both ends. The authority was very slow at taking the right decisions to remedy the situation, which continued to deteriorate further. Hence, the social fabrics started weakening and the peace and harmony were threatened. On the international scene, ethnic conflict and violence in Russia and the Arabian countries were escalating. Such news portrayed by the media aggravated the situation in Mauritius. The ethnic concerns in the multi ethnic society started reappearing. There was an ethnic revivalism and the Mauritian nation, with its increasing pockets of poverty, was at stake. Issues such as ‘malaise Creole’, which meant the vulnerability of the Creole population regarding poverty, came to the forefront. Although poor people were found in all ethnic communities, yet it was a fact that a relatively higher percentage of the members the Creole group were living in a more deplorable state. Poverty, which was at first regarded as a result of the class phenomenon, took an ethnic dimension in Mauritius. Unfortunately, the death of the famous Creole singer in February 1999, Kaya, acted as a detonator for the explosion of the large scale violence in the country. The ethnic riot of February 1999 paralysed the society for nearly two weeks. Much of the socio-economic progress made by the country was tremendously affected.

Institutional and Constitutional arrangements in Mauritius

Multi-ethnic societies usually face much problems arising from ethnically and religiously diverse groups. Therefore, there is the need to develop strong and robust constitutional institutions which could help reducing and mitigating tensions and provide a permanent basis for solving most of the problem. Roeder P. G. (www.yale.edu/macmillan/oceyprogram/lcec2/roeder/roede r.pdf) rightly claims that ethnic differences constitute one of the most important cleavages that states must accommodate. This is very true in multi-ethnic societies for there to be peace, harmony and nation building. Since mid 1960s, Mauritius has witnessed important institutional and constitutional arrangements like the Best Loser System. In one way or the other, such arrangements have largely contributed to national unity and nation building. Institutional arrangements in Mauritius usually guarantee the rights, freedom and identities of the population and help to create the environment for unity and peaceful living. Soon after the 1999 riots, the revivalism of ethnicity has made ethnicity so visible that no government can ignore the phenomenon while making decisions. The country has noticed the emergence of quite a number of institutional provisions since 2000, given the high visibility of the ethnic concerns of the diverse groups on the forefront.

Best Loser System (BLS)

The BLS is a unique system, found only in Mauritius, guaranteeing the representativeness of the minority groups in Parliament. During the mid 1960s, when the country was about to become independent, the fathers of our Constitution designed the best loser system with a view to enable each ethnic group to be fairly represented in the National Assembly. In a multi ethnic society as ours, it is of utmost importance that each community feels secure and safe by having someone, from their groups, represented in the supreme decision making institution. The best loser system allows eight candidates, who failed to get elected, to join the National Assembly, based partially on their ethnic identity. Mathur (1991) claims that the best loser system promotes
and encourages communalism which is detrimental to nation building. However, the World Bank Report (1997) gives a different view by arguing that the best loser system, by ensuring representation of each ethnic group in parliament, has contributed to the social cohesion in Mauritius. The latter argument makes much sense in the Mauritian context, as the minority groups feel safe and secure given that they have the assurance that there will be members of their community in Parliament.

Actually in the country, the government is having contacts with different stakeholders to go for electoral reforms. Since the beginning of the new millennium, there has been two major reports on electoral systems, one known as the Sachs Report and the recent one named Professor Carcassonne Report. Both reports recommend, in one way or the other, the abolition of the Best Loser System and the introduction of some forms of proportional representation system. Given the weak and fragile multi-ethnic Mauritius, the state should think seriously before embarking on an electoral system without the best loser system. Many people, mostly the minority groups comprising the Muslims, Christians and Chinese population, still believe that the BLS guarantees representation all the ethnic groups in Parliament. The BLS acts as a factor for social cohesion and the population feels that it should be maintained at all cost till an effective alternative that can ensure the representativeness of all ethnic groups in Parliament is found. The BLS, as a constitutional provision, acts positively on the psyche of the minorities who feel secure and therefore should be maintained. Any government has to bear in mind the possible consequences that may result with the elimination of the BLS on the fragile social fabrics of the Mauritian society.

Cultural Centres and Speaking Unions

Since 2000, successive government have come up with certain institutions that are thought to both foster unity among the population and also benefiting the different ethnic groups. Several cultural centres have been constructed in Mauritius in order to preserve the cultural values of the different ethnic groups. For instance, there are the African Cultural centres – basically for the Creole community, the Islamic Cultural Centre – basically for the Muslim community, the Tamil Cultural Centre, Telugu Cultural Centre, Marathi Cultural Centre for the Hindu population and the Chinese Cultural Centre – for the Chinese population. In addition to these cultural centres, the country also has the Mauritian Cultural Centre created in 2001 which has as its main aim the promotion of the Mauritian culture. On the other hand, to preserve the languages of the different ethnic groups, the Government has created Speaking Unions. For instance, we have recently witnessed the coming up of the Creole and Bhojpuri Speaking Unions in addition to the already existing Speaking Unions for Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi and Mandarin, amongst others. In multi ethnic Mauritius, the maintenance of the diverse cultural values and the preservation of the different cultural languages help to maintain the sense of belonging and social cohesion among the members of the various groups.

Although some people view that creation of different speaking unions lead to more division yet the reality in Mauritius is different. Given that the majority of Mauritians are by nature a tolerant population and they practice cultural relativism, the existence of different cultural centres and various speaking unions enriches the cultural values of the population. The people are socialized in different cultures and traditions and this might explain the success of Mauritians who leave the country to work abroad. They adapt easily to different societal values, norms and traditions. Besides, the exposure to different cultural values in Mauritius can also, in a very subtle manner, explain the hospitable nature of Mauritians vis a vis the tourists which has resulted into a successful and stable tourism industry generating large amount of foreign revenues.

2008 Equal Opportunity Act and the consolidation of Nation Building

This Act has been welcomed positively by each and everyone in the country. During the presentation of the Equal Opportunity Bill in the National Assembly, the Honourable Prime Minister, Dr Navin Ramgoolam, showed his commitment to level the playing ground for all Mauritians regarding equal opportunities in all areas of life, whether it concerns recruitment for a job or promotion in any sector, access to education or a service, and social justice and human rights, amongst many others. The government of the day has been praised for their willingness to build a just and fair society where all the citizens will have equal rights and opportunities to succeed and prosper. However, the application and implementation of the act has been retarded, mainly because of the administrative complexities to put the law into practice. Recently, more precisely in November 2011, certain amendments were brought to the Equal Opportunity Act so as to facilitate its implementation. Although the government is taking much time, regarding its implementation, yet it should be given the credit to have brought such an important tool, which will help consolidating social justice in the multi ethnic Mauritian society thereby leading to the consolidation of nation building as all people will have the same opportunity to progress and develop. However, the challenge to succeed in life does not depend totally on the provisions of the Act but also and primordially on the efforts put in by the people themselves. The Act will, in fact, be a facilitator creating same and equal chance for each and every Mauritian. To put the Equal Opportunity Act into practice it is believed that there should be the right person in the right place to make and take decisions for the benefit of all Mauritians. There is the need for effective leaders at all levels of the state to manage the society.

Good governance for the sake of a just and fair society

Good governance has much to do with the competent management of a country’s resources and affairs in a manner that is open, transparent, accountable equitable and responsive to people’s needs (www.ausaid.gov.au/publications/pdf/goodgovernance.pdf). It normally assures that corruption and mal practices are minimized and the views and voices of both the minorities
and the vulnerable population of the society are heard and taken into account in decision making. (www.unescap.org/huset/gg/governance.htm). Good governance is part and parcel in achieving success in management of a society which results into socio-economic and political stability and development. Since independence in 1968, all governments have, as far as possible, taken good decisions and implemented same for the best interest of the population. This explains the Mo Ibrahim Index ranking of Mauritius on the top position in Africa, regarding good governance, for the last three years. However, the classification of Mauritius on the top of the list does not necessarily mean that the country is immune from corruption and mal practices. Everyone in the country knows pretty well, and it is a fact, that corruption, nepotism and mal practices in government, private sector and civil society exist in the society. Both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition have shown much determination and commitment to fight against corruption and other ills of the society. Nevertheless, it seems that they do not always get the support of all members of Parliament and the private stakeholders. Bringing new laws to punish people found guilty of malpractices are not always the best measures to fight corruption. According to a big majority of the Mauritian population, the country needs a change in the political culture. Many of are of the view that the financing of the political parties should be more transparent and there needs to be accountability. Politicians need to understand that they cannot function beyond the law. The common people cannot be expected to follow rules and regulations correctly when the prevailing perception about politicians, both for government and opposition parties, is negative. Since the last few months, the social media is denouncing much of nepotism cases and ill practices in the society and that is high time for scrupulous politicians and government officials found guilty to be brought to task. Government cannot continue ignoring such important information as the result might impact negatively on the social cohesion and consolidation of nation building. There is a general feeling among the population that those in power should manage the society for the benefit of all people. With the global financial, economic and social crisis, Mauritius will not be spared permanently. Therefore, for the sake of the nation, all state stakeholders need to put people first and work for them as responsible patriots. Besides, it is a known fact that a few private companies and non governmental bodies operate with hidden agendas, thereby exploiting the society’s scarce resources. The state should take bold decisions to remedy the situation before it is too late. All state stakeholders need to understand that the 21st century is high tech led and that information cannot be hidden for long.

Search for Mauritian Identity and consolidation of nation building

Ethnocentrism is viewing the culture of others through one’s own cultural lenses while cultural relativism means viewing the culture of others through the cultural lenses of the other (Macionis, 2002). For there to be development and social stability, multi-ethnic societies put a lot of emphasis on cultural relativism to make social life possible. Mauritius is generally known as the paradise of the Indian Ocean as it is considered to be one of the most tolerant societies in Africa. Mauritius has four main communities namely Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Chinese. None of them has a homogeneous population. For instance, Hindu community is divided into several ethnic groups like Marathis, Telugus, Tamils, Vaish, Rajput, amongst others. The level of social interaction and mutual understanding among the different group members is very high. Foreigners and tourists are often surprise to find the peaceful living of the different ethnic groups in the society. The fact is that Mauritians, whatever be their ethnic origin or cultural differences, are socialized since birth to live together with others. The primary socialization is so strong that people of different communities get along very well in all areas of life. Although the majority of the people are always proud to put their ethnic identities before the national ones, this does not mean they blindly follow their ethnic groups and help only their community members. When there is a road accident or any natural calamity, Mauritians do not look at ethnicity but they behave and act as good human beings, helping those in distress. The wearing of Jeans, eating ‘dhollpuri’, singing and dancing ‘sega’ or celebrating Christmas is not reserved for members of one community. Mauritians are different and it is not only the holding of a Mauritian identity that will make them act as true patriots. Patriotism is inbuilt in the people.

Mauritians are by nature a tolerant, respectful and hospitable population. However, a few scrupulous and malignant intellectuals, politicians and religious heads create the division among the various ethnic groups for their vested interest. It has been noticed that during the approach of elections, most people are reminded of their ethnicities by politicians. The latter like the ‘divide and rule’ policy. Anyway, politicians are not the only ones to benefit from ethnicity but a few intellectuals and religious heads do also take advantage. Whenever, corrupt intellectuals or religious people are in difficulty, they look for support from their ethnic groups. The culprits are portrayed as victims. With modernization and development, the common people are aware of the dirty games played by politicians, intellectuals and religious heads. The latter need to learn quickly from the recent Arab uprising. With the new generation of youth, things have started to change and if the trend continues, the old dirty games of scrupulous people will not have their place in Mauritius. The young people behave and act differently and most of them want to live in a just and fair society and with a Mauritian identity.

Concluding Remarks

Since the past decades, the state has been confronted with the enormous and delicate task of consolidating nation building in Mauritius. Although some progress has been noticed, as people of different ethnic groups live and work peacefully side by side, yet tensions may crop up resulting into conflict and violence, if not managed properly by the society. This makes us all realise that we are constantly walking on an ‘ethnic volcanic bomb’ which may erupt at any time, thereby, affecting tremendously all the socio-economic development made, as have been the cases in 1968 and 1999 riots.
From this paper, it has been found that the Mauritian state has always laid much emphasis on nation building, which has been its main priority. We can see that the country has all the necessary ingredients to consolidate and sustain its nation building. The high level of tolerance, mutual understanding and cultural relativity on the part of each and every community are the basis on which the state can realise its vision of a harmonious, stable and an all inclusive Mauritian nation where good governance, transparency and social justice prevail. Scrupulous politicians, malignant intellectuals and auto proclaimed religious leaders who practice what McKay has referred to as ‘Manipulative ethnicity’ (Haralambos & Holborn, 2000) to form groups and create social problems for nation building should be brought to task. Therefore, there is an urgent need to consolidate good governance at all levels with a view of building a just and fair Mauritian nation where everybody feels included.

References